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– ROBIN WILLIAMS

THIS ISSUE

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EDITOR'S LETTER



The power of mountain biking culture is an impressive thing. I've always been acutely aware of that as long as I've been riding. Most, if not all, of my closest friends have been a result of some faction of bike culture, be it industry colleagues, race competitors or just those who love to ride. We all have a common love of gathering because of the cycling lifestyle—serious rides, not-so-serious rides or simply goofing around at a pub or party. This past February I became more aware of it than ever.

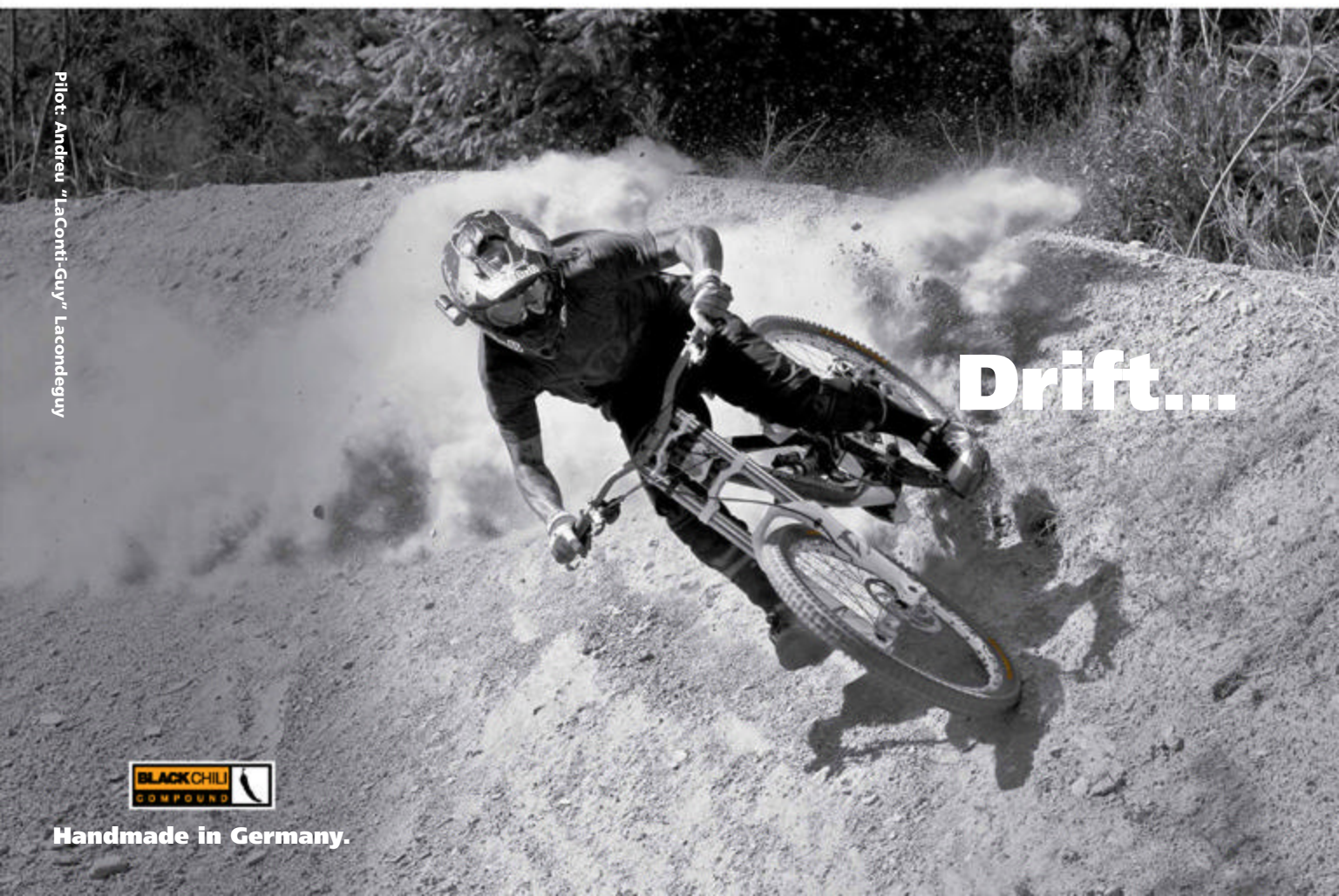
Far from my East Coast home, in Palm Springs, California, I got an unlikely chance to ride with three friends on some desert trails like it was the early 2000s. Except for our exotic new bikes, it was like time hadn't passed at all. Having once lived in SoCal and ridden together on "epics" before we knew what that word meant, we had all seemed to branch off and go in various directions, me being the farthest. Now, splintering off from a group ride, Ron, Jordan, RC and myself found ourselves alone on the trail having many of the same conversations as we did back then, picking on each other, wondering how we let time slip away and, of course, as the loop lingered on farther than expected, feeling like it was another one of those "RC rides" where he claimed he knew where we were going. When we finally rolled back to the hotel with huge smiles, there was a group hug and promises to not let it be so long again.

During the same week, a random call to an old friend I hadn't seen in more than a decade resulted in a road trip from California to Arizona for 24 Hours in the Old Pueblo—the same trip we did together in 2001. "Hey, Kim, how do you feel about picking me up in Palm Springs and driving to Tucson?" I asked. Her quick response was, "I think I love that idea. I'll bring the cooler." And like it had been only 14 days rather than 14 years, the conversations and stories began right where we left off, talking bikes and trips and everything else.

As the week came to a close we found ourselves at a backyard party hosted by one of the on-site mechanics from a local bike shop—new friends and camp neighbors we'd made at the race through shared beers and proximity—and if history repeats itself in the way it habitually does, they will soon become old friends too. Friendships made between those who gather through the common bond of riding mountain bikes are the kind that last forever.



MIKE CUSHIONBURY, *DIRT RAG* EDITOR IN CHIEF



#183 CONTRIBUTORS



MATT HAYES

Since graduating from the University of Colorado, Matt has gallivanted around the world riding, racing and wheelie-ing bikes in 10 states and 11 countries. He's coaxed an ancient motorcycle around Colombia, hitchhiked through Patagonia, surfed in Ecuador, drunk Trappist brews in Belgium, bicycle toured through Europe, eaten sushi on the docks in Tokyo and thrown snowballs on a glaciated volcano in Chile. He learned the intricacies of Spanish when he needed to eat, the complexity of entrepreneurship by starting a business and the excitement of racing mountain bikes while getting beat. He's worked in bike shops for a decade, crafted syndicated Web content for 1,000 independent bicycle dealers around the country and coordinated international sales for a large bike brand.

Matt's odyssey to Colombia starts on page 46, but currently you can find him in Colorado's foothills perfecting designs for the Conation Collective, his new American-made mountain bike apparel line. More at ***conationcollective.com****.*



STEPHEN HAYNES

An illustrator surviving in provincial Pennsylvania, dividing his time equally between his studio and kitchen with occasional outings to check the mail, Stephen is possibly most well known for both the conception and birth of Bicycle Times magazine's advice columnist, Beardo the Weirdo, who is said to have come out of the womb a 43-year-old man. The two are now estranged. As an illustrator, he has received top billing for his work in both the den and dining room of his own house and was once said to have held a coveted position at the very top of his own mother's refrigerator. He teaches biweekly art-history classes to his two small children while they ignore him completely and play video games.

Stephen, who is the art director for our sister publication, Bicycle Times, and a regular Dirt Rag contributor, recently went on a mountain bike trip to Israel. Check it out in "The Dirt" on the next page.



DAN MILNER

Dan is a British professional photographer with a degree in marine biology. Realizing that opportunities to replace Jacques Cousteau seldom arise, he has spent the last 17 years carving out a living in photography instead. His chosen subject is the world's more diverse and demanding locations for adventure. His love for travel, combined with a masochist tendency, has led him to accept snow-shoot assignments in places like Mount Elbrus in Russia and Norway's polar-bear-inhabited Svalbard archipelago, but his underlying passion is bikes—riding them, photographing them and using them as both an excuse to travel and a very real tool to break down social barriers wherever this passion leads him.

*Dan was joined by riders Hans Rey and Tibor Simai, along with filmer Rob Summers, for an incredible Argentina Railroad adventure starting on page 54. More of Dan's work can be found at danmilner.com and on Twitter (****@danmilnerphoto****).*




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ISRAEL

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN HAYNES

Most of us have bucket lists containing places we'd like to eventually visit and ride, myself included. As mountain bikers, we may choose those destinations based on the density, quality or focus of singletrack established in a particular location.

Israel has all the ingredients to be a mecca for mountain biking, from world-class trails of nearly every stripe to a community of passionate and devoted riders, organizers and trail builders. There are hotels developed specifically to accommodate the traveling rider, cuisine that will please the most discerning foodie and innumerable historic and religious sites for the amateur historian in all of us.

The country itself seems to constantly be shrouded in one controversy or another, and talking about this place in positives or negatives can incite vehement discussion depending upon the audience. I'm neither religious nor well educated with regard to history or global affairs, so to say I am ignorant on the subject of Israel would be an understatement. That said, I like to travel, meet new people and come face to face with culture and traditions that are different from my own.

My trip to this small Middle Eastern country left an indelible impression on me. All the blown turns, the hair-raising descents and the weightless feeling of swimming in the Dead Sea have physically left me, yet the aura surrounding my memories is one of warmth and delight, and I'll carry that with me forever.

Read the feature story on Stephen's trip to Israel online at: dirtragmag.com/Israel.



















BEHIND THE WHEEL WITH BAMA: LUST FOR FREEDOM

WORDS AND PHOTO BY BAMA



We'd been riding Sedona, Arizona, singletrack and drinking all day. It was getting late, we were all tired and it was a perfect time to know I had to quietly escape on a solitary, man vs. himself cross-country motorcycle trip.

The sun came up as I walked off the plane in Orlando, Florida, and I nearly collapsed in the wake of the thick, dank fog of humidity. I was now a long, lonely ride from home.

Everyone had told me I was crazy for taking a motorcycle road trip in the middle of winter, but I probably am crazy. I've ridden through blizzards in the Rockies and hailstorms on the Plains, seen fire and rain, but pain fades with time and the adventurous spirit grows wild and wooly. Bolder, braver and psychotic, if not exercised to the point of fatigue.

Regardless of my own inclinations and vagrancy vagaries, this trip wasn't entirely my idea: My old man had gifted me a motorcycle. He lives in Florida and I was in Arizona. I had no choice. I had to ride this mystery machine thousands of miles, into a cold, westerly headwind. On the surface, the reward was obviously the bike, but secretly, I'd be all alone for two weeks—just the highway and me. Total isolation, a form of solitary confinement that I have little experience with.

My old man picked me up at the airport. We stopped along the way and grabbed a bite to eat at a fast-food joint. I was so smoked from the redeye flight and the hangover of the previous day's boozing that I wasn't really hungry, but out of habit, I ate just the same. When I finally got to my dad's place, he showed me the bike. It was ugly and old. I knew he wanted to see an expression of gratitude, but the coffee and "greasefast" I just had was forming a line of scrimmage in my gut.

I faked a smile. I strapped my bags on my back. I was gone.

Halfway into Georgia, it started raining. I traveled on through Birmingham, Alabama, and into Jackson, Mississippi. I passed dilapidated mobile homes and a field of Civil War–era cannons, crossed bridges that seemed overwhelmed just by the toll of gravity. I rode through Alexandria, Louisiana, and on into Austin, Texas. The freezing rain was taking its toll and I learned via social media that my friend Hurl from Cars-R-Coffins fame was heading to Austin for the cyclocross national championships. In the spectacle of it and under the influence of delicious "brownies," bourbon and cigarettes, I spent two days there.

It had been cold, but on my way out of Austin, the weather took a real digger when an ice storm swept through.

As I passed miles of tumbleweed and quintessential west Texas limestone—all wearing a toque of ice—the endless reflective banter in my brain was just as deafening as ever: "It's so cold, stay warm, scrunch your toes, make a fist, fight the frostbite."

This conversation with Self was contained and protected from the wavelengths of the general public by the fiberglass and foam of a helmet: I was the only man on a motorcycle, and I was all by myself. My thoughts of pain were so incredible, so intense, that even a 1,000 cc engine slamming the rev limiter at 90 mph was not even noteworthy.

Almost a year ago, I met a man in Santa Cruz, California—a hardworking, selfless type who genuinely cares about others. Blue collar and educated, sophisticated and dirty. Thirty-something, but with the spirit of a 3-year-old and a passion for old motorcycles.

A few days following our juncture, he was diagnosed with a very advanced, very fatal cancer. He's doing fine now, and I can't say that anyone is really surprised by his survivability; the guy's toughness is coupled with an incredible attitude. But as I was freezing my ass off in the middle of winter, riding my motorcycle through an endless field of broken dreams, I just couldn't help but think about the whole thing. How a young man rode the line, endured a hellish year of chemical poisoning and beat cancer. And then he sent me a text message: "Heated grips are your friend." This coming from someone who's endured 12 months of chemotherapy and stood toe to toe with the grim f'ing reaper.

Heated grips?

Heated grips! As if cold weather was a worthy worry for him?

Discomfort is the litmus for adventure. When comfort has been attained, we have given up and are no longer living. We are casually wasting our time. Feeling hot or cold means you're still living your life. Feeling comfortable is a surefire sign you've given up and quit truly experiencing this life. Ezra's struggle, strength and fight form my beacon to go and see, to live and love.

New trails and friendships are waiting for you. Spend less time researching and more time getting lost. Spend less money on gadgets; instead, leave outrageous tips. Don't worry about going on a designated vacation; spend more time at a friend's house. Forget about grievances and forgive the bullies. Remember your lovers and appreciate them. Don't fight living, fight to live no matter how tired you might be.

Chris Milucky (better known as "Bama"), his wife, Tanesha and their dog, Larry, once logged more than 50,000 miles a year driving across the country. They are now building a new home in Colorado. All they ask is that you keep singletrack single and support your local bike shop.


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OLDIE BUT GOODIE

I have been a fan of your mag for years and years. The t-shirt I'm wearing in the picture (with a local guy that runs a tiny bike shop in Alto Porvorim, Goa, India) is old, old, but I still love it.

Hope you like the pic.

Have fun out there!

Pedro

Portugal

FRIEND OR FLOW

When Dirt Rag Issue #182 arrived I glanced at the table of contents. The article "Friend or Flow: Are Trails Being Dumbed Down" jumped out at me like the big fat rattler I almost ran over on the Flourish Trail at the Monte Sano Land Trust. A number of guys I ride with recently got their master trail builder certifications and we've been debating this "Friend or Flow" issue. Their state-of-the-art trail building training highly emphasized the Flow philosophy. We are all old school, rock garden singletrackers. I thought Sarah Galbraith's article was extremely well written and it fully captured the key essence of this debate. That said, I subscribe to the opposing side of her position.

Yes, I do agree that machine groomed Flow trails do make mountain biking more accessible to novice, intermediate and women riders and these trails are much easier to maintain. However, what makes mountain biking so awesome is the pucker factor of fully committing to a rock-laden fall-line that is so gnarly that the consequences of any hesitation will have dire and painful results. I'm not saying that I enjoy getting hurt but as one of my riding buddies told me when I was transitioning into mountain biking, "When you get tired of getting hurt, you'll learn how to ride." It's amazing how quickly you learn to ride when the alternative is ugly.

What I love about mountain biking is that it is so much like skiing. All the same principles apply (such as "when in doubt, straighten 'em out"). I grew up skiing and learned to love anything back country and ungroomed. "Flow" mountain bike trails are like adopting the "Deer Valley, Utah" approach to skiing – nice wide groomed slopes without a soul. What gives Sarah's article so much credibility is that she is writing about Mad River Valley in Vermont. If there is one place on the planet that understands "soul", it's the folks at Mad River (assuming they're Mad River Glen people and not Stowe people). The first time I skied at Mad River Glen, I was a Rocky Mountain snob. Mad River has no snowmaking, no grooming and a single person chairlift. Standing in the lift line, you quickly realize that you're not in Kansas anymore. No one has matching ski outfits, skis are over 200cm and duct tape is a well-used accessory. As you get off the lift, you have to hike up into the woods to find the trailhead and then drop-in off the top of a frozen waterfall to the trail. As you stand there, you realize that there is no margin for error as you count the number of trees that you will bounce off if you don't nail your landing. Then it hits you, the brilliance of Mad River Glen. This could not be a more perfect ski experience. This single chairlift limits the traffic on these narrow trails. The head-high moguls, while intimidating, provide a line to navigate down the near vertical descent. It's all part of a perfect system to deliver an epic experience that tests your commitment to the run. It's frightening, exhilarating and glorious. I'm assuming that these same hardcore Mad River Glen skiers are the same folks that are struggling with the concept of groomed mountain bike trails.

While I enjoy being challenged with gnarly, technical singletrack, I also like trails that drain well. While we are fortunate in the Southeast to be able to ride year-round, the winter rains wreak havoc on our trails. I would like to have some trails that shed water and are rideable in wet conditions. The Flow trails I've ridden drain extremely well and can be ridden relatively soon after it rains. I absolutely refuse to let bad weather keep me from riding so I do greatly appreciate having some Flow trail systems nearby when Monte Sano is too wet to ride.

Sarah's article reminds me of why I enjoy your magazine. She did a great job of identifying and capturing a critical philosophy shift in trail building, which has the potential of a seismic impact to our sport. While I'm not a proponent of groomed trails, I absolutely agree with Sarah's suggestion to maintain diversity. She proposes to provide alternative Flow trails for the masses and let the locals ride the "off the map," double secret, double black diamond goat trails. Let's keep a little Mad River Glen spirit in our sport.

Gary Bolton

Huntsville, AL

A RETURN TO PARADISE?

Paradise, utopia, call it what you want, it's a personal idea that we form in our mind of where life could be no more perfect.

I lived there once, but it wasn't my utopia then. The weather was invariably disappointing and my job was worse. A beautiful woman walked into an imperfect place and 15 months later I sold (almost) everything and moved 3,000 miles to a place an hour outside of Toronto, Canada.

I have been back home to Peebles in Scotland several times since then, winter, spring and summer and it's been great. Family, old friends and quickly realizing that it feels like you never left. It's never been utopia yet though, always something missing, this year I'm going back with the one thing I left with, my mountain bike.

You see, the hills around the town have the most accessibly challenging trails I have ever ridden and they start 1 second from the edge of town, not too steep, not to flat, a real Goldilocks zone.

I started riding the trails with friends on a mountain bike around '88 or '89, awful bikes but an awful lot of fun, a few years later a better bike (stolen), then in '95 a better bike still. That summer it felt like I was out every day, short bursts up to the radio mast, middle ring all the way, straight route down, skipping over rocks. All day rides, long way up and over the hill tops to Innerleithen. That's the bike that I left with, now relegated to the commuter, I'll take the newer full suspension bike to go back.

Lots of changes happened around 2000, the beginnings of a big trail network and all the work was worth it. Word got out, the place got busier, I moved away.

So in June I will pack myself, bike, wife and mother-in-law and go back for a couple of weeks. A holiday, so no work, the weather will be what it will be but here's hoping for two blissful weeks in paradise.

Neil Beaumont,

Toronto, Canada

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BEER ME



THOMAS CREEK CASTAWAY

CHOCOLATE ORANGE IPA

WORDS AND PHOTO BY ALASTAIR BLAND

The flavor, smell, zest and spice of hops of this one will transcend every other trend in brewing. India Pale Ales are perhaps the most popular beer style in the American craft beer world. For many breweries, the IPA is their flagship beer—the one that draws people in the door. But eventually, even a devout hophead might ask, "Does the world need another IPA?" Perhaps considering this very question, the brewers at Thomas Creek Brewery, in South Carolina, did something novel: They doused their IPA, and softened its brilliant glow of hops, with chocolate. While they were at it, the team added orange peel to the recipe. The result is Castaway Chocolate Orange IPA, a brownish malty-tasting diversion from America's favorite beer. The smell is rich and fudgy, with hops just an element in the blend, not the featured item. One is left with a prominent taste of Tootsie Rolls and, when the bottle is drained, the satisfying fullness of having finishing a barleywine. **ABV: 7.5%**

ASK THE EXPERT:

Q: Which five tips do professional mechanics want everyone to know?

A: Number 1: Chains are over-lubed; not enough is better than too much. Over-lubing attracts dirt, collects on rims, sticks to brake rotors and will end up on your leg. With disc brakes it can contaminate the rotor and soil your brake pads. That's just Bad News Bears. If you see lube on your rim at any time, you have too much on your chain.

Number 2: Tires are usually over-pressurized, especially in the mountain bike world. Maximum tire pressure is not optimum tire pressure because conditions can dictate a 10 to 15 psi change from low to max. Maximum psi is the most you can put in a tire before it will blow off the rim, not what you should be riding; riding at max psi can cause a loss of control and make for an undesirable trail experience. Base your tire pressure on conditions by riding a trail you know well to understand how the bike performs. Then start with a lower setting than what you've been using and don't change it for the next few rides. Experiment. Control and grip play huge factors here, so inflate or deflate based on this.

Number 3: A good bike shop will get your controls in a safe, proper setup, but every bike should then be tailored to your personal style. Most people don't touch their levers after buying a bike. The angle of the brake levers, the position of the shifters, where they sit on the bars inward should all be adjusted to be comfortable. I always use the analogy that bikes are like a suit for men or a wedding dress for women: You take it off the rack and then style it just for you. The shop setup just gets you started.

Number 4: Bolt torque. Torque wrenches are critical for bikes now, so follow recommendations. Every bolt has something different; even if your bike isn't carbon fiber and costs $10,000, it's still critical for safety. Under-tightening is just as dangerous as over-tightening. You don't need an expensive torque wrench, just a very basic one. If not, take it to your local shop and trade for a beer or a sandwich to have your mechanic go over everything with a quick five-minute check.

Number 5: Tip your local bike shop mechanic if you get good service. We work in the service industry. Anyone can change a tire, but we still do it all the time with a lot of care. It's good to develop a relationship with your mechanic on the small stuff so when things really go wrong and you have no chance of fixing it yourself you know you'll be in good hands.

Peter Hall
15 years as a professional mechanic
5 years of wrenching at the elite team level domestically
southmountaincycle.com

FROM OUR FACEBOOK PAGE

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ON OUR UNDER TRAIL BIKES UNDER $3,000 TEST:

"Thanks for reviewing some more affordable bikes, not everybody can buy a $5,000 bike."

"Kona is doing it right. Great geometry, tasteful looks and it's a roaster."

"I keep reading it as [Santa Cruz] Batman and getting all excited."

"My entry level bike cost $40 bucks. Five years and many, many miles later it's still the bike I ride."

"At my house, $3,000 is a pretty nice used Saab."

"You can buy new motorcycles for less than mountain bikes."

"Why are full suspension bikes $3,000 anyway? They have been around for 20 to 30 years. Why so expensive still?"

ON HOWARD HAWKINS, THE FOUNDER OF PARK TOOL, PASSING AWAY

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SWTPYITFB: RELATIONSHIPS

WORDS AND PHOTO BY STEVIL KINEVIL



The sun was warming the earth and the skies were as clear and blue as they come in Northern California. It seemed as good a day as any to unchain myself from my desk and emerge from my cave for a bike ride. As I looked over my handsome stable, the bike that yowled most loudly was my new Blue Collar one-speed 'cross bike. Built for me by my dear friend and teammate Robert Ives, I'd seen this bike go from the drawing board to a pile of tubes and machined bits to the gloss-black beauty sitting before me. "I'm just going to have a long and mellow spin to nowhere," I thought to myself.

Walking out of my basement and running through my mental checklist as I have thousands of times before, I emerged back into the light, and before I knew it I was mashing up the immediate slog just outside my door. It was then that I began to reflect on the folly of my initial intent. When turning over one gear, at least in these parts—oftentimes referred to as "punchy"—there are no mellow cruises to anywhere. When finally arriving to the dirt, the punishment continued. I thought back on nearly 20 years of bikes with one gear and marveled at the reality that it's never gotten any easier. Like a soldier's stride, the rhythm becomes nearly musical in its repetitiveness, inching me ever closer to nowhere in particular. Climbing into the bottom of the ridgeline's haze, a mixture of condensation and sweat dripped periodically from the end of my nose, and I imagined what my hunched and straining figure must look like to the creatures I was now sharing the woods with.

Upon my eventual arrival at the summit, I found some relief with the first of many short, albeit nearly necessary, descents. This was a lesson I learned from the single-minded who came before me. "Kill yourself on the climbs and recover on the descents," I recall former Salsa employee and Soulcraft Bicycles' co-founder Matt Nyiri once mentioning to me from his toothy grin. Being a recent inductee into their guard, I figured that because he was always about 20 feet to 2 miles faster than I was, he must know that of which he spoke, so I took that lesson to heart, and in my heart it's always remained. Short descent, gut-punch climb, short descent, gut-punch climb…and so my day—and, likewise, my life—went and has continued to go.

Eventually, I pulled over for a rest and reflection, my ears overflowing with quiet save for the call of a nearby hawk. I couldn't help but ruminate on the path that brought me here, both literally and figuratively. The trail itself is as familiar to me as my own history, which in turn is what brought me to this particular moment to begin with. Tall Matt, Leroy the Champa, Steve Rex, Ferrentino, Mr. Blacksocks, my jump-suited Amigos, Big Steve P and Rick the Stick: If it weren't for them, I might never have known the sweet, yet occasionally blinding, pain of pushing my bulk across the earth without the aide of derailleurs.

After a short spell resting in the tall dry grass of my church, I once again remounted my steed and headed toward the ride's eventual conclusion.

Some might consider the gearless gluttons for punishment, and some might be correct in that assertion. It's certainly a relationship focused on the balance between pleasure and pain, and as the crunching terra firma churned beneath my tires and the woods became a passing blur of green and brown, I concluded that this relationship and the balances therein are just like life itself. DR



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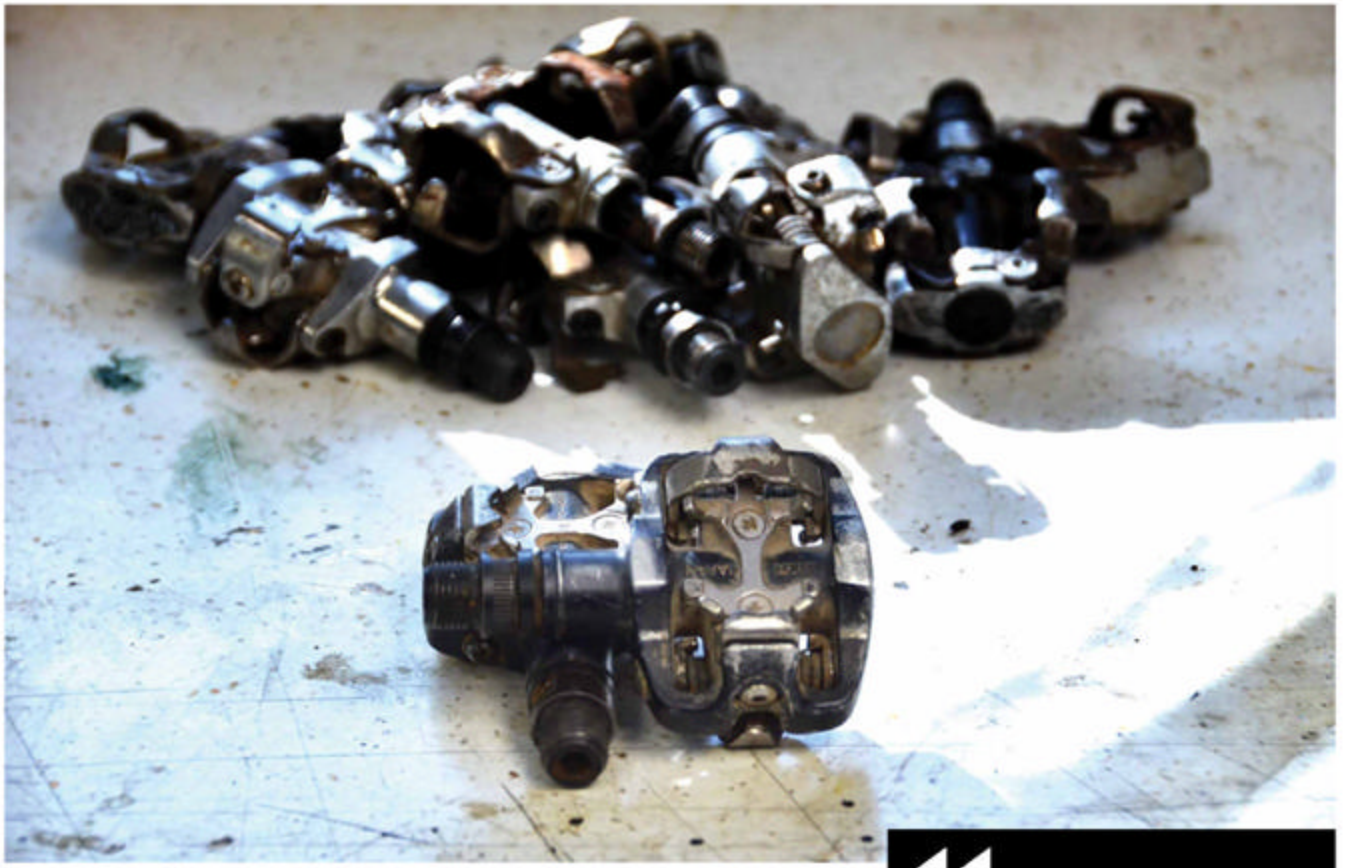
PROVE ***CAN'T*** WRONG.

PIKE ROCK SHOX

BUILT FOR THOSE WHO CHARGE.

THE RANT: EVOLUTION VS. STASIS

WORDS AND PHOTO BY ERIC MCKEEGAN, *DIRT RAG* TECH EDITOR



Some things never change. It never gets any easier for me to write this column. For someone so full of opinions and criticisms, actually getting them down on paper (or, more properly, in pixels) is always a painful process. Maybe not as bad as Mr. Vonnegut had it, but still, not as easy as it should be after doing it on a regular basis. Which may be how I wrote an entire column that only upon finishing did I realize was a rehash of a bunch of stuff I've already written. While I could probably turn that in and get away with it, Dirt Rag and its readers deserve better.

While digging around for some Shimano clipless pedals to take to an overseas press camp, I came upon a set of SPDs that were more than a decade old. They still function fine and work with the same cleats as any other Shimano pedal; they just lack the modern mud-clearing cutouts.

Why bring this up? Is there another bike part that has seen so little evolution? Even the competing brands haven't changed much throughout the years, although at least one of them could stand for some redesign work.

While we could bemoan the lack of evolution here, I think we can chalk this one up to pedals being a mature technology. Even the least expensive of Shimano's mountain bike pedals last for years and work so well as to be indistinguishable from the more expensive pedals, except for weight.

Even Shimano's biggest competitor, SRAM, isn't poking the bear on this one, which is telling. SRAM has been paying attention to the way people ride and has been pushing drivetrain evolution with 2x10 and now 1x11, leaving Shimano to play catch-up both times. Same thing on the road side of the market, with wide-range cassettes for road bikes and drop-bar shifters that still work with mountain bike derailleurs. Maybe SRAM is secretly developing pedals? I doubt it, as it seems SRAM is pretty savvy when looking for chinks in Shimano's armor and pedals are not a weak point.

In some ways it is amazing that the 9/16th crank/pedal interface has remained the same for so long. No oversize, no PressFit, no spline interface—just good 'ol fractional sizing. What else hasn't been changed, or at least has other options? Maybe the 22.2 mm handlebar diameter for grips and controls?

If I were a superstitious man I wouldn't write about this long-running standard, as it would surely cause someone to change it for 2016 to an oversize standard, but I have a feeling everyone has their hands full with the constantly moving target that is modern axle standards.

> "WHEN I WRITE, I FEEL LIKE AN ARMLESS, LEGLESS MAN WITH A CRAYON IN HIS MOUTH."
> —KURT VONNEGUT

The few standards on a bike that have been deemed good enough to be left alone are a bit of ammo against the argument that the bike industry engages in planned obsolescence and changes that are rooted more in sales than improved performance. I think we might be reaching the stasis point with a few other components (wheel sizes and 35 mm bars, for example), and that might be a fine thing.

GET OUT THERE

PHOTO: GIBSON // RIDER: SNEDDON



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RUSCH JOB: MAY I HAVE ANOTHER?

WORDS BY REBECCA RUSCH | ILLUSTRATION BY DAN BLAUSHILD



This column marks a couple of coinciding anniversaries. My first article for the venerable Dirt Rag magazine was about a year ago, right after my first (and woefully unsuccessful) attempt at Jay Petervary's Fat Pursuit near the Idaho-Wyoming border (Issue #177). That 160-mile slog was my first long fat bike excursion and also the topic for my first writing experiment with Dirt Rag. A year later, I'm still beating myself up trying to tell you interesting bike stories. I had the choice to gracefully bail out of my column this year, but I didn't. Apparently I didn't get enough with my first dose of whoop-ass on a fat bike, either. I had to go back again and ask Jay for another serving.

What is it that keeps us returning for repeated doses of torture? As modern-day cyclists, is it not enough to enjoy a comfortable, social ride with friends? Must everything be "epic" to be worthwhile and fulfilling?

While I was in the Fat Pursuit riding alone this year, the glow of my headlamp illuminating a circle on the snow, I had plenty of time to reflect on this—16 hours and 32 minutes, to be exact. I was moving as my own self-contained unit with GPS, sleeping bag, stove, layers of clothing, food, water and an iPod. It was technically a race, but really it was an organized solo adventure laid out to test me.

All of this time alone in my head made me think of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It builds on the premise that you can't reach a higher level until the previous one is met. Because this was bikepacking, I was responsible for the Basic Needs: food, water and warmth. Check. Rest? Well, that could wait until the finish line. Moving up the pyramid, security and safety were shared responsibilities between the race organization and me. Sure, there were warm checkpoints with cocoa and sympathetic volunteers, but once on the trail my own personal safety rested firmly back on my shoulders. After the basics are covered, we can move to the Psychological Needs of belongingness and esteem. This is where we tap into why we all sign up for big challenges. First, we want to hang with our mountain bike tribe. Second, we want to feel good about ourselves and proudly read our name on a finishers list. This allows us to stay members of the tribe and have stories to tell over beers.

For a year, Jay's course had silently taunted me to come back and try again. This was not a ride I would go out and do on my own, but since it was on a website with times and finishers listed, it called me back. My name was not on the finisher list yet. Was this one of Maslow's Psychological Needs that I had not fulfilled? I told myself I would be perfectly fine without another torture-fest added to my résumé. But still I returned. Maslow was right; my esteem needed a boost.

My ego got a healthy feeding on the course a couple of times, and I admit, it felt good. While I was riding, snowmobilers stopped by the side of the trail and in unison raised their arms toward the sky and made bowing motions toward me as I went by.

Another group enthusiastically yelled out over the sound of their throttle as I was sweating and toiling at 5 mph, "You've got a big set of balls to be out here like this."

Even if they couldn't see it, I was grinning proudly under my facemask. Yes, I like being called tough, and even being told I have big balls. I like hearing these words from others because most times I don't feel that way myself. Maybe it's narcissism, but who doesn't like a pat on the back every once in a while? Maslow says we need this.

Having now conquered the course, I know that the real reason I went back was for the personal challenge. To touch the pinnacle of the Pyramid of Needs and feel fulfilled, I still had to reach my full potential on this course. I needed to have my name on that finisher list not for you, but for me. Of course, I also ride because I like to be away from cell phones, computers, laundry and Dirt Rag deadlines. I like the pure act of simply moving through the wilderness on my bike. But what I really needed this time was to know I could actually finish the damn thing, Maslow style.


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CATCHING UP WITH: SEAMUS POWELL

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY BRICE SHIRBACH



Seamus Powell has been on a bit of a tear over the past several seasons. The Round Top, New York, native began his career as a neo-pro cross-country racer, chasing UCI points as a junior and making quite the name for himself with frequent displays of tremendous fitness and power. In 2013, Powell won twice during the USAC National Championship weekend at Bear Creek Mountain Resort in Pennsylvania, taking the pro singlespeed and Super-D titles. That year he shifted his focus from a more cross-country-oriented regimen to the surging, gravity-based format of enduro, taking the overall titles for two of the East Coast's highest-profile enduro series, the Eastern States Cup and the Triple Crown. Powell skipped the 2014 Singlespeed National Championships but repeated his feats as champion in the gravity-race and enduro series. He also was given the opportunity to try his hand in a few Enduro World Series (EWS) events. His continued successes throughout the previous year eventually led to an opportunity to pursue his dream of being a professional racer on the Giant Off-Road Factory Team for 2015.

Describe the work you've put into becoming a part of the Giant Factory Off-Road team.

The transition from the regional pro team to the factory team is a process that has been going on for a few years now. I've always wanted to be a pro rider for a factory squad, but it wasn't until I graduated from college a few years ago that I really began to pursue it. That's when it was announced that [the] national championships were going to be held here on the East Coast in consecutive seasons, and I was able to treat those two years as a transitional period for me. I wanted to be able to show that I could do it. The first year I won the Super-D National Championship, in 2013, was a bit of a head-turner for Giant. Unfortunately they didn't have the space on their program going into 2014. But they helped me out as much as they could by bringing me to places like the Sea Otter Classic and some Enduro World Series events in a low-stress situation. It was up to me to be able to show them that I could handle myself well in those situations. But my main goal going into last season was to defend my title as the Super-D national champion and the Eastern States Cup and Triple Crown enduro series champ, which I was able to do. Between that and performing well at the EWS events, it was enough for them to bring me on board in 2015 as a factory development rider.

What are your goals this season?

I'll be going to Sea Otter, the Enduro National Championships and the domestic EWS events. With those higher-profile races, my goal is just to be in the mix. This year will be the first for an Enduro National Championship and I'll be looking for a top 10 result there as well. With EWS events, I just want to improve my overall standings from last year. I got some top-30 overalls last year and made it inside the top 20 on some of the stages. In fact, after one of the stages at Whistler [British Columbia], I was sitting in first place before all of the big guns came down the mountain and blew my time out of the water. I'll keep racing the Eastern States Cup and Triple Crown events as well.

How much has it meant to you to have such a broad support system from so many people over the years?

I always tried to train with faster guys, like my buddy Justin Lindine. We grew up together riding and stuff. Back when I was racing cross-country, he was a big asset to me because he's so strong. He'd push me harder than anyone else early on. I have also been blessed with the amount of support I have received from local bike shops over the years. Whether it's running a tab for me throughout a season and allowing for me to pay it off as I go, or loaning me tools for races or just helping me build my bikes up, it's been really great. My brother was a downhiller before I was, so he helped me learn a bit about bike setup and positioning on a bike. My whole family has been a big part of this. My dad was a racer and both of my folks have always been supportive, along with my brother and sister. I think that my parents saw my passion for this stuff early on and they're the kind of people who will do damn near anything to help their children achieve their dreams.

A lot of pros migrate to the western United States when they reach this level, but you're sticking with your eastern roots. How has coming up through the East Coast scene impacted your career development?

The racing scene is so strong here. The riders are really, really fast. Having that high level of competition obviously pushes the boundaries every weekend. I think that some of these races are scarier and faster than some of the EWS races that I've done. I remember being nervous heading out to Crankworx for the Whistler race and thinking that I might be in over my head. But as I was on some of those stages, I was just like, "This is nothing compared to the stuff back East, at least in terms of technicality." So why would I want to be anywhere else? The winters are the hardest part of being in the Northeast, but my support system is already in place. This is my home and this is where I want to stay. DR















11

THE LOST DIARY
Every trip should be full of the unknown and take a little bit of guesswork. This is a reminder to take off and get out—and get lost.

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SPECIALTY FILES: 1987 BONTRAGER TRIALS

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JEFF ARCHER



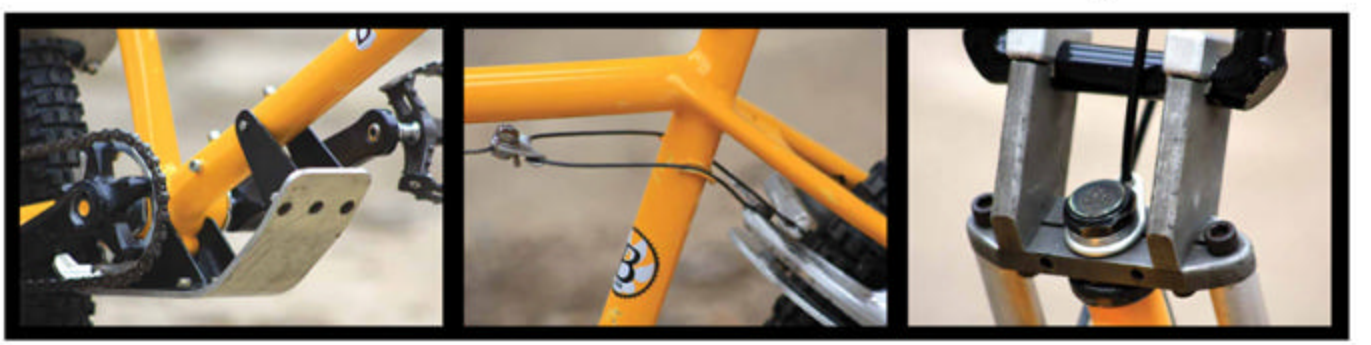
These days, there are a myriad of categories for mountain bikes: hardtails, singlespeeds, fat bikes, downhill, freeride, all-mountain, enduro and so forth. Back in the beginning, we just had mountain bikes. Trail riding: mountain bike. Downhill: mountain bike. Trials competition: a trials bike? Yes indeed, because in the early days of the sport, a trials bike was one of the only specialty bikes made.

Observed trials puts a rider through a series of natural and man-made obstacles. The goal is to navigate the course without touching (dabbing) a foot on the ground or leaning against an obstacle. Dabbing is based on a point system, with the lowest score winning. Getting a low score requires the ability to hop the bike as well as perform track stands. There were (and still are, in some places) classes for standard mountain bikes, but serious competitors would use a special trials bike with smaller-diameter wheels, powerful brakes, a high bottom bracket and oftentimes a bash guard.

This particular bike was designed by Peter Delaney and built by Keith Bontrager. Folks who only recently started riding might recognize the Bontrager name as a designer for Trek, but he started in the bicycle industry as a wheel and frame builder. Since this is a one-off bike, there are some interesting features. The fully fillet-brazed frame has integrated mounts for the bash guard. The plate-type dropouts allowed the rider to change gear ratios depending on the course by placing the chain on a different cog and adjusting the wheel position within the dropouts. The front end is also unique, using a double-crown version of the Bontrager composite fork—a type of fork construction that was later used on early suspension forks. The upper fork crown and handlebar risers were crafted from magnesium plating to help keep weight down.

Overall, this is a very interesting bike from an underappreciated branch of the mountain bike family tree.

This bike can be seen at the Museum of Mountain Bike Art & Technology, which is housed at First Flight Bicycles in historic downtown Statesville, North Carolina. If you can't visit in person, check out the collection at **MOMBAT.org**.



SEDONA SINGLETRACK

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PHOTO / DAN HOLZ

READINGS: WIDE-EYED FOR 365 DAYS

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY LESLIE KEHMEIER







I'M ALREADY SEEING THE REFLECTION OF A PERSON WHO IS FOCUSED ON EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS







After reading the book "The Happiness of Pursuit," I was inspired to start a quest to shoot, process and post a photo every day in 2015. As an ambitious, "think big" kind of person, I connected with the book immediately. It reignited a part of my passionate self that had faded.

Most importantly, the book made me question myself: What's next? What is most important for me to pursue? These questions were also driven by the culmination of a recent personal journey representing some of the most difficult times I have ever experienced in my life.

Photography is a clear-cut answer. This quest is an opportunity to pursue my craft daily with purpose and confidence. It's also the vehicle to improve and expand the body of my work. While I expect to create many images related to outdoor sports like mountain biking, I also intend to explore other genres. As I start to build a collection of images, I'm already seeing the reflection of a person who is focused on experiences and relationships that keep me both challenged and balanced.

See Leslie Kehmeier's daily work at **thewideeyedworld.tumblr.com**


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READINGS: SINGLETRACK SIX

WORDS BY BARRY WICKS | PHOTOS BY JOHN GIBSON



When I first started racing bikes, my mom used to drive me to races in her blue Dodge minivan. My bike, my most prized possession, would be carefully tucked into the back seat, protected from scratches and the elements. We would listen to the alt-rock station or NPR when the signal was strong enough, the sounds of "Car Talk" or the Smashing Pumpkins becoming the soundtrack to life. Not much has changed, really.

Today, my friend and teammate Kris Sneddon reaches a hand through the spokes and tugs at the wheel strap, trying to figure out how to secure our bikes to his new bike rack. His Jeep idles in the parking lot of a Days Inn, air conditioning cranked, waiting to take us into the mountains as we sweat in the mid-August heat, struggling to make sure our bikes don't fall off, AC/DC trickling weakly from an inadequate sound system.

The Jeep makes a decent road-trip vehicle, its boxy space swallowing up more gear than its small size would suggest. The solid axles leave something to be desired in the handling department, but they make up for it when the road turns up steeply into the brush. Our bikes bounce and sway as we jostle down the trail, but they stay attached.

We finally reach our destination: the start line of the Singletrack Six in British Columbia, Canada, with its claim of "Ride the West." It's a funny claim, since we just drove more than 600 miles east from the Sunshine Coast to get here. We decide to keep an open mind and see what singletrack secrets hide for us in the vast wilderness of eastern B.C.'s Kootenay mountain range.

I still get butterflies in my stomach, even after hundreds of start lines in my race career. It's exciting that the feelings are the same as they were when I did my first race ever, as a lanky 13-year-old on a 24-inch Sekai Rammer, hustling the dual-slalom gates at Oregon's Mt. Hood Ski Bowl. I won that first race, not only because I was the only one in my category, but also because that first race got me hooked on the feelings. The sensation of getting away with something, being allowed to break the rules of everyday life, is still there every time I line up, looking to break free from the bounds of normalcy and escape into the turbo world of racing.

Singletrack Six's first stage traverses Moon Mountain and the Bragg Creek drainage west of Calgary. It features the first of many timed descents throughout the week. Trailing Kris by a minute and a half at the top of the climb, I drop into the descent with abandon and quickly become very intimate with a trailside tree. First lesson of the trip: Six days is a long time—better to be careful and not wreck yourself on day one.







WE SPEND SO MUCH TIME AS BIKE RACERS IN A DISTRACTED WORLD INSIDE OUR OWN MINDS





Nursing a sore shoulder, I cross the finish line and head straight for the pile of watermelon laid out in the hospitality tent. Rivulets of sweat drip out of my salty helmet and into my eyes, so I head for the river. I brace myself for the broken chill of the pearlescent, blue-green water clouded by the glacial till of thousands of years of mountain history. I take a breath, close my eyes and plunge in. As I hit the water my muscles immediately seize, my breath catches and for a moment I am suspended in a fizzing cloud of sharp blue-green nothingness. I leave only a ripple in the insistent flow of time as water continues its rush to the ocean. My head breaks the surface and I scramble back to the bank, cooled and refreshed and shocked by the frigid water.

I have done this before, this lowering of my body into the swirling powerful waters of somewhere. It always helps to connect me, to ground and focus my spinning mind. Roots me to the mountains. I let the icy water come up over my face and keep my eyes open, welcoming the sting into my periphery, watching the colors pop in my field of vision as the water washes over me.

We spend so much time as bike racers in a distracted world inside our own minds. The effort and focus necessary to be successful is a very effective method of blocking out the real world. I think that is the truth of why people ride their bikes in the first place. It forms an escape, a distraction from reality where everything except the task at hand fades away. For many, this is pure bliss; the echoes can last throughout the day and week following the ride. It is this feeling that gets them through the next staff meeting or spreadsheet task.

For me it is different, but also the same. My entire existence, my purpose as a professional athlete, is to occupy that special zone, to go into that region of finite focus, to suspend reality and go really, really fast on my bike. I do this daily, train for it, practice it and make this my special place and my default mode.

Like any good thing, excess can be detrimental. Just as with the brain of a coffee drinker lacking caffeine stimulation, fog and chaos sets in. It has become an intrinsic need for me, both an addiction and catharsis escaping into this hyper-focused world of the race mind. DR

Editor's note: Barry Wicks is a longtime Kona Bikes team member. He paid his dues early on the World Cup mountain bike and cyclocross circuits. These days he focuses on long-distance gravel events and mountain bike stage races. Read more at about this adventure at **dirtragmag.com/singletrack6**

INSIDE LINE: SANTA CRUZ STIGMATA CX & HIGHBALL 27.5 AND 29

WORDS BY ERIC MCKEEGAN | PHOTOS BY SVEN MARTIN



When Santa Cruz sent the invite for a media camp in New Zealand, there was little info on what the new bike or bikes might be. After much speculation including guesses of fat bikes, 27.5+ or a new Tallboy LT, we were surprised by new carbon hardtail Highballs in 29 and 27.5 and the return of the Stigmata cyclocross bike as a race-focused, full carbon frame.



STIGMATA

About a decade ago, Santa Cruz released an aluminum framed cyclocross bike, which became an instant favorite. Long after it ceased production Santa Cruz still received regular requests for frames and sponsored riders like Steve Peat were still riding their old Stigmatas for training.

The new Stigmata is full carbon fiber with all the modern standards including a press fit bottom bracket shell, which is a first for Santa Cruz. All cables are routed internally and in true race bike style, there are no fender or rack mounts. Tire clearance is generous, with room for a 41 mm tire, so this could be a hell of a dirt road bomber as well. Our ride covered a ton of different terrain, from pavement to short bits of technical trail. The Stigmata handled it all in stride, feeling best when pushed hard, as a race bike should. Frame and fork will be $2,300, with complete bikes from $3,700 to $6,600.



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HIGHBALL 29 AND 27.5

The 29er Highball has been around for a few years, but with the rising popularity of 27.5 it's no surprise to see this bike in both wheel sizes. The 29er gets updated geometry with slightly shorter chainstays and a longer top tube. The 27.5 has very similar geometry, with even shorter chainstays and a degree and a half slacker head angle measuring 69 degrees compared to 70 on the 29er.

After solid rides in on both bikes, and for the first time ever, I actually preferred a 27.5 hardtail to the 29er version. The slight differences in geometry ended up with wheelbases that are almost identical, but to me the day was won by the more reasonable head tube angle of the 27.5. Or maybe it was the dropper post on the smaller wheeled bike. I took the 27.5 version home to Dirt Rag headquarters to get a proper test, but the dropper seat post installation involving zip ties around the top tube already revealed one of the few flaws I found with these bikes: no dropper routing. While these hardtails are aimed at the cross-country race market, many are already adding droppers to their bikes.

There will be two levels of frames offered, the high end CC and less-expensive C. Santa Cruz claims there will be little difference in ride quality, just more weight for the C frame. There will be five complete bikes: two C-level and three CC-level. Prices start at $2,800 for the base model, to $6,800 for the full XTR/Enve bling bike. Bare frames only come in the CC level for $1,900. Prices are the same for 27.5 or 29.



HIGHBALL ALUMINUM

With zero fanfare the new aluminum version of the Highball was released a few months back, with the same geometry as the new carbon bikes. While the aluminum bikes won't have internal routing, they do have interchangeable dropouts, including a sweet swinger option for singlespeed use. Frame only is $750, complete bikes at $1,700 and $2,000. There is no 27.5 version of this one, just 29. Santa Cruz figures the 27.5 Chameleon should keep most riders happy. Personally, I'd love to see a 29er version of the Chameleon as well, but much like a Santa Cruz fat bike, that won't be an option in the foreseeable future.

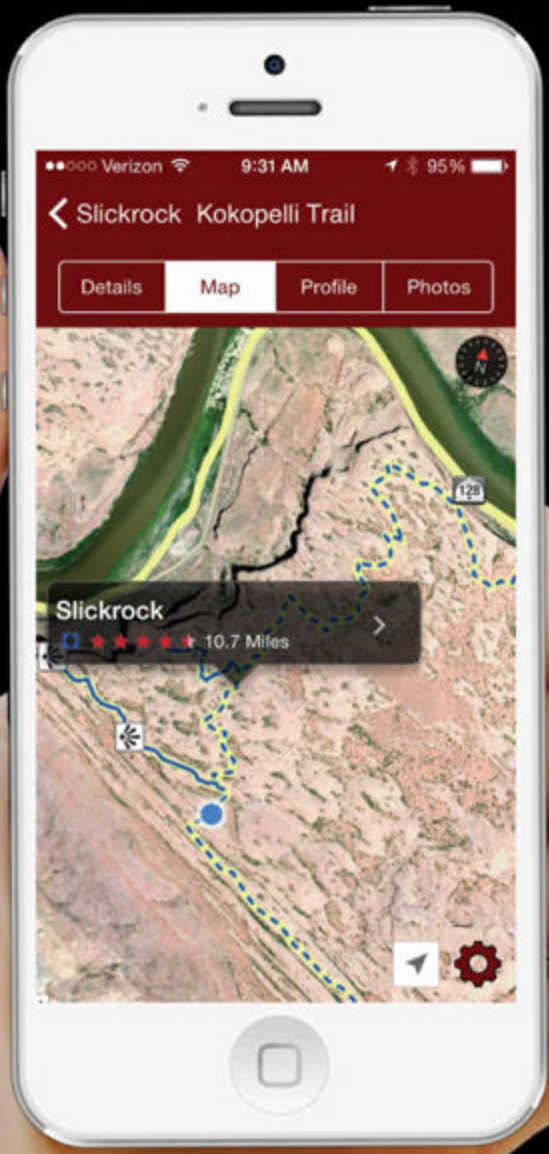


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INSIDE LINE: SHIMANO XTR Di2

WORDS BY MIKE CUSHIONBURY | PHOTOS BY COLIN MEAGHER



Shimano presented its electronic XTR Di2 group in Palm Springs, California, this past February, installed on our long-term Pivot Mach 429 SL. After a few shake down rides in the Springs I went directly to 24 Hours in the Old Pueblo in Arizona to get more warm weather time on the parts before taking the bike home to the still snowy east coast.

I wanted the full experience of Shimano's much touted "auto-shift" front derailleur, so I set it to Syncro mode and had the front shifter removed before riding the bike even once.

The initial rides were incredible and I continue to be impressed. The performance is amazing and so far is delivering as promised. As you slide through the rear cassette in the big ring you'll hear a small double beep when you hit the large cog, indicating that the next shift will automatically drop the chain into the inner ring. When that happens the rear derailleur moves down the cassette a few gears to compensate. When you're in the small ring and up shift almost to the middle of the cassette you'll hear the double beep, meaning the next shift will move the chain into the big ring and the rear derailleur will automatically move the chain up the cassette to tighten up the ratio. I've purposely left the exact gears vague because it's all adjustable at home via a downloadable computer program—I customized mine a bit to better suit my riding style.

The question of control never came into play. As I became familiar with the timing I began to anticipate the shift, yet at times forgot I had two rings in the front—it was that smooth. There were no problems with power shifts jamming the chain or





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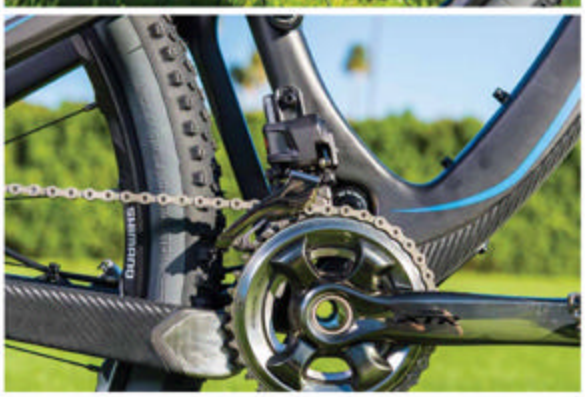
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> IT'S GOING TO CHANGE THE FACE OF MOUNTAIN BIKE SHIFTING. IT'S THAT GOOD.

chain derailment. The more I've ben riding XTR Di2 the more I'm believing it's going to change the face of mountain bike shifting. It's that good.

The Mach 429 SL got the full Race set up, including XTR carbon fiber race wheels, and a Pro Tharsis XC Di2 optimized bar and stem. The Tharsis cockpit routes all shift wires through the inside the bar and stem, directly into the internal routing of the Mach 429. Pivot is one of the first companies to design routing to accommodate Di2, so the end result is almost completely hidden shift wires. One lone wire sneaks out of the frame at the head tube and routes up through the fork steerer with one caveat: the steerer must be cut a touch below the top of the stem to utilize the wire port and hide the wire as it routes inside the stem to a hidden junction box, inside the handlebars and out to the display monitor and rear shifter.

Look for a full, long-term test in the next issue, followed up with a long-term test of the mechanical group.


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Zermatt Switzerland:

Epic Trails In The Shadow Of The Matterhorn

Words by Lukas Keller
Photos by Martin Bissig

Step by step, we are pushing our bikes slowly through a crowd of people. We hear voices in countless languages we can't understand, along with the clicking of camera shutter-release buttons—a complete opposite to what we experienced on a mountain ridge at well over 9,000 feet earlier in the day. But the whole thing here in Zermatt, Switzerland, is simply a bit different.

The Gornergrat rack-and-pinion railway, which took us from the village center to Gorner Ridge in half an hour, transported us along with a few bikers and hundreds of tourists into the mountains. All had the same goal: to cast a glance at the most famous mountain in Switzerland, the Matterhorn. The scene here on Gorner Ridge is bizarre in this high-alpine setting, with countless sightseers buzzing to and fro, trying to find the best place for a souvenir photo. Adding the final touch to this romantic postcard-like image are Bernese mountain dogs and long-bearded men with alphorns available for photos—for a fee, of course.













This whole scene is too hectic and we are glad, after finally having left the crowds behind, to reach more trail. It is the first time that we can now take a look at the Matterhorn without ruffle or excitement, and it shows itself in very good spirits today. This pinnacle of a mountain sits majestically enthroned, overlooking the valley before a steel-blue sky. Although it's not the first time we've seen the Matterhorn, we are still fascinated and impressed by its incredible beauty; we can barely tear our eyes away from the view to focus on the trail back down to Zermatt.

Finally releasing our brakes, we set ourselves in motion. Smooth and with an abundance of fluidity, the trail sweeps through mountain meadows. Deep in the valley to our left is the Gorner Glacier, flanked by the more than 13,000-feet-high Castor, Pollux and Breithorn; right before us sits the 14,692-foot Matterhorn, ascending into the sky. Even though it's difficult with this panorama before us, we must devote our attention entirely to the trail because the nature of our route has changed, leading now downhill on steeper and rockier terrain, forcing us to choose our lines with utmost care. Upon reaching the forest boundary, the trail becomes again easier and smoother. The forest soil provides perfect traction and is taunting us to increase our speed as thick roots and ground undulations become like ski jumps for joyful leaps. We finally reach Zermatt with broad grins on our faces, leaving behind 4,900 feet of the finest singletrack descending there is.

The long run costs large amounts of energy, so we find a restaurant in a small town above Zermatt. Time here seems to have stood still in the last hundred years. In one of the wooden houses with a stone foundation typical for this region is a small restaurant

that serves local specialties. A käserösti (a cheese-and-potato cake topped with Gruyère cheese) and a homemade rhubarb tart refill our energy tanks. Although the cozy atmosphere invites lingering, we have to get moving again. Many trails are still waiting to be explored.

To save time and energy, we again take the train. This time, an underground funicular takes us to the 7,500-foot Sunnegga in just three minutes. After a short but steep climb, we turn off onto the next trail. The path is steep, splinted and serpentine, encouraging us to test our skills. Farther down, the trail suddenly levels out and continues almost endlessly on soft forest floor toward the valley. It is one of those trails where you have to neither pedal nor brake to maintain perfect speed—the utmost definition of the word flow. Then, suddenly, the trail spits us out of the woods and we are back in Zermatt, at the valley station. Without any hesitation, we head right back to the Sunnegga train, realizing that such a utopian trail is simply too heavenly to be ridden only once.

A few hours later we are sitting in Zermatt in a garden restaurant to end the day with a well-deserved beer. Swiss flags are hanging above and in front of us; at the far end of the valley glows the





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Matterhorn, red and looming, seeming as if it were taken straight out of a painting. We can't remember having ever ridden on so many different trails in only one day. Zermatt, renowned as a tourist destination, has a huge infrastructure of cable cars, and many of the railways transport mountain bikes in the summer. Since there is hardly any time wasted pedaling uphill, you can concentrate on descents all day long. This area offers a wide network of trails with varying difficulty, therefore suitable for beginners and professionals alike. Although we were riding all day, we still saw only a fraction of what Zermatt has to offer. Like the tourists who came and will surely return to this mountain paradise, we also will be back. DR



Zermatt

How To Get There

Zermatt is located in the Canton of Valais, in southern Switzerland near the Italian border. Car-free Zermatt is accessible by train, taxi or helicopter. (The train journey to Zermatt is quite an experience.) Drivers can easily leave their vehicles in a car park in Täsch and continue by train; they leave from Täsch every 20 minutes, and the trip to Zermatt takes only 12 minutes. Airline passengers take the train directly from the airport and reach Zermatt from Zürich Kloten Airport in three and a half hours or from Geneva International Airport in four hours with a change in Visp. Alternatives: taxis, helicopters (Air Zermatt), Glacier Express.

The Best Season

July to October. At higher altitudes snow can linger into spring, and early snows are possible in autumn.

Tips

Depending on the area and season, there can be many hikers on the trails, so considerate behavior is important. A bell is recommended. Depending on the routes, it is also suggested to ride during off-peak hours.

Bike Shops

- Bayard Sport, **www.bayardzermatt.ch**
- Slalom Sport, **www.slalom-sport.ch**
- Guiding/bike-riding technique Bikeschool Zermatt, Adrian Greiner, **www.bikeschoolzermatt.ch**

Maps & Guides

- Singletrail map, Zermatt/Saas Fee, **www.singletrailmap.ch**
- Supertrail map, Zermatt/Saas Fee, **www.supertrail-map.com**

Downhill Route

For downhillers, there is a technically challenging downhill course on the Sunnegga that goes directly to Zermatt. More information at www.zermatt.ch

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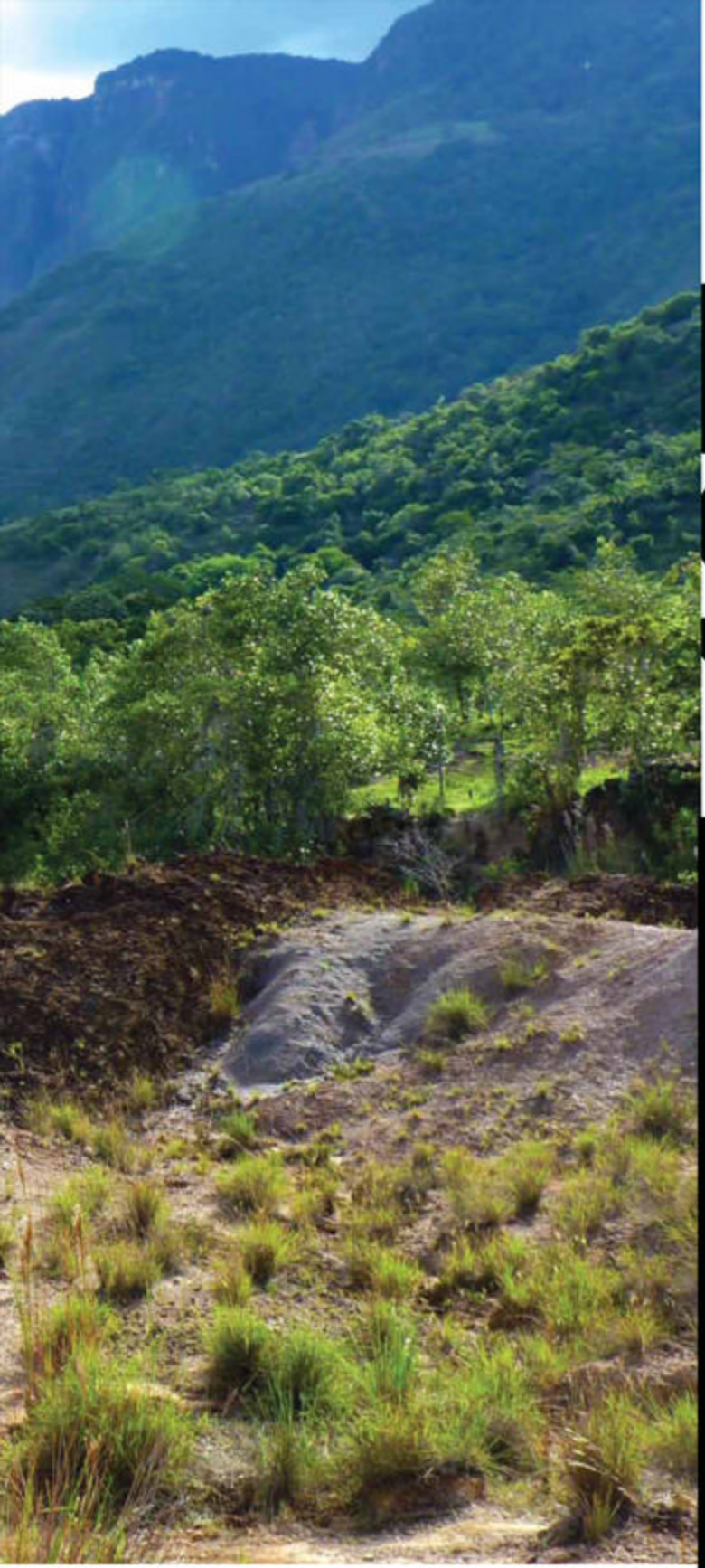
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SAN GIL

Words and photos by Matt Hayes

"Noventa" is the word I gave to the immigration officer in the Bogotá airport. Meaning "90" in Spanish, it's the most consecutive days I could legally stay in Colombia and the agent seemed surprised. "Ninety?" she confirmed in timid English, wondering if I was saying the right word. I nodded.

I didn't know exactly how long I wanted to stay in Colombia, but I had been privy to the amazing people, landscape, and culture of the country before on a previous three-week visit, plus I had brought my bike on the journey, so I knew it would be a while. I grabbed a taxi to the bus terminal and headed to the outdoor-sports capital of the country: the small town of San Gil (pronounced "San Hill").

San Gil sits in a beautiful climate range—comfortably 85 degrees year round, day and night. Its elevation is high enough to keep the jungle's insects to a minimum, but the daily afternoon rain showers ensure the flora is a vibrant green from the valleys to the tops of the mountains. The raging Rio Fonce, perfect for rafting, runs straight through this 50,000-person town, and the roads and nearby trails offer endless mountain biking.

With out-of-practice Spanish and no cell phone, I was worried about how I'd navigate the city at 2 a.m. when my bus got in. Luckily my friend Mike had gotten my last-minute email from the airport's Wi-Fi and greeted me at the bus terminal with his signature goofy grin that takes up half his face. Suddenly, despite more than 24 hours of travel time, I was reinvigorated and stoked to be in Colombia. We loaded my bike box into his early '90s white Land Rover Defender and headed for his house.

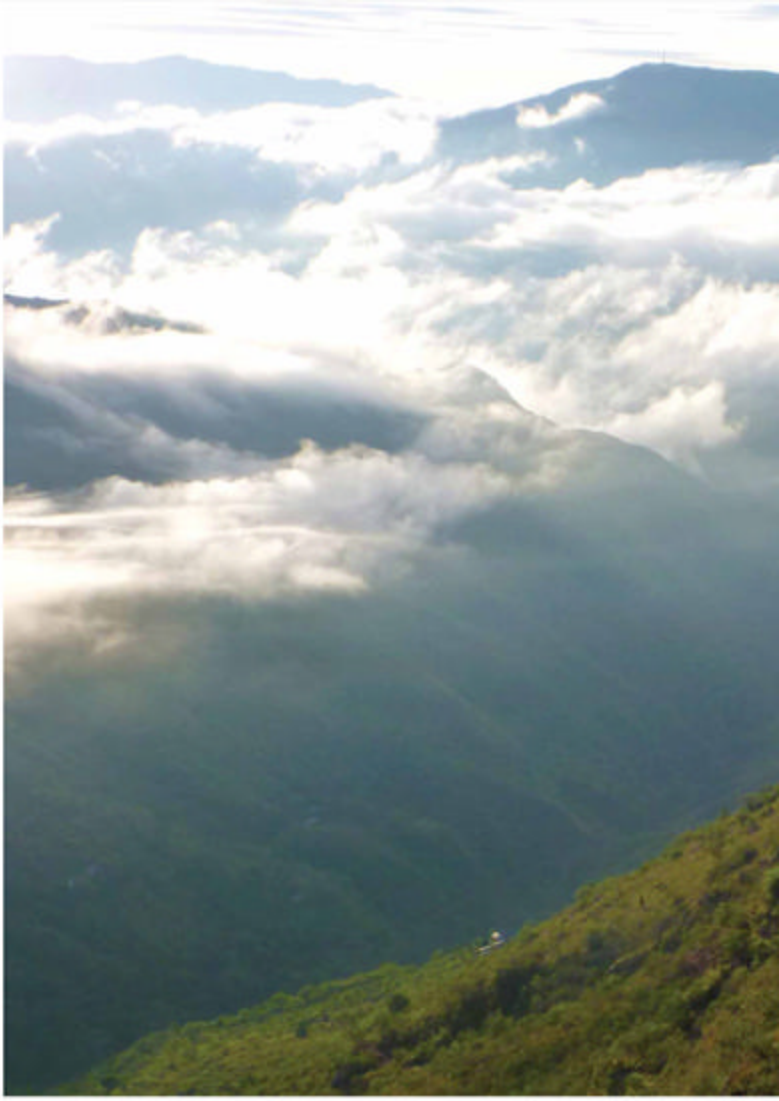
Mike's place has become a sanctuary for international cyclists, and the next morning I was introduced to Jamie from the U.K.; John the Kiwi and his British girlfriend, Jemma; and local rider Miguel. Kat, Mike's girlfriend, was already out taking advantage of the day.

EL PUMPTRACK

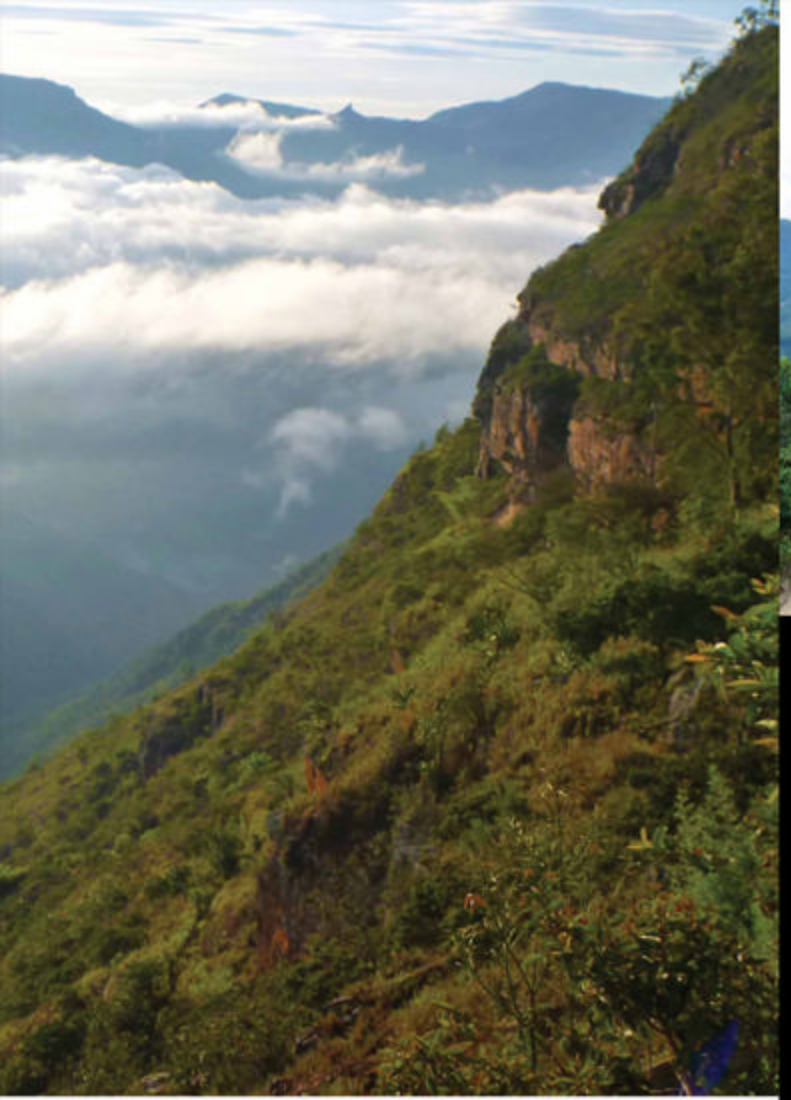
John, a 22-year-old who's optimized his years by doing things like guiding on Bolivia's Death Road and coaching in Whistler, British Columbia, started by showing me the pumptrack he was building in the empty lot across the street. A local church owns the land and he had used all sorts of hand tools, along with a copious amount of weedkiller, to hack this short track into the persistent tropical grasses. He explained that he was trying to build features that not only tested his skill, but that were fun for all the 8- to 12-year-olds who showed up with no helmet and bikes in various states of disrepair. While John envisioned manualling three rollers through a corner to keep his momentum, local kids were just as excited to get speed from pedaling and pop their front wheel off the ground.

I was impressed by how versatile the track was, providing fun and challenging options for any riding level. I was even more impressed when I learned that John negotiated with a local older lady, asking that she tie up her grazing cow so it wouldn't trample the berms. I don't know how I would explain to a 60-year-old woman, in a foreign language, that her cow was ruining a bike track, but he got it done. About a week after I arrived John also had to convince a construction crew to dump their rubbish away from the pumptrack, a feat accomplished only by letting them watch him ride it first. Shaking their heads at the crazy gringo, they agreed to keep their refuse on the edge of the property.

John, Jamie and I spent countless hours and many bottles of sunscreen perfecting the pumptrack flow with shovels and dull machetes, scraping an inch off a roller here or moving the apex of a berm there. Unfortunately we were the only ones who appreciated the detail, because although the local kids showed up every day, they were happy with anything we built.











AEROPUERTO PISTA

The best trails for mountain biking around San Gil are actually ancient highways created about 200 years ago so goat farmers could move their herds to market. Called camino reals, these routes were originally about 20 feet wide, and not only were they hand-paved with stone, but a three- to six-foot high stone wall was constructed on either side for the entire length. Camino reals crisscross Colombian farmlands throughout the Andes, and over time tenacious plants have reclaimed all but small footpaths.

Several years ago San Gil had lofty aspirations of becoming a tourist destination, so they built a road to the site of their future airport. Unfortunately, construction stalled and the airport remains nonoperational, but the dirt road that was constructed is an easily pedalable route up to the camino real that Miguel and his friends have co-opted as their own. It's dubbed the Aeropuerto Pista; I've watched Miguel's crew disappear into the woods with shovels and rakes many times, returning sweaty, dirty and sometimes bloody, but I had never seen the results of their work.

Miguel's the son of a legendary Colombian road-racing mechanic who instilled in him a love of bicycles. When Miguel's father died, Miguel's life fell into disarray as he turned to drugs to cope with the pain and found himself living on the streets for a short while. He pulled his life back together and now, still in his early 20s, he's a faithful father as well as the best rider and mechanic in the area.

One afternoon, Jamie, John and I followed Miguel and a few friends through the city until we arrived at the bottom of their trail. We opted to push up the trail instead of pedaling the access road to get some idea of what we would be riding. Three-foot drops, triple rhythm sections and 13-foot-long wedge jumps materialized out of the underbrush with each hill crested or corner turned. The biggest jump on the track required drifting the sweeping turn before it to keep enough speed, a seemingly impossible feat on the hardtails that Miguel's friends were riding.

At the top, Miguel took off with the kind of confidence that can be gained only by building, riding and memorizing your own track. After a few laps we started learning the lines, but Miguel still had a substantial gap on us when he ran into trouble.

John came across him first—his bright blue, yellow and red jersey moving in uncommonly slow motion. Miguel was holding his knee, which had a nickel-sized hole punched through the flesh, no doubt the

result of colliding with one of the centuries-old paving stones we were skimming across. Dumping half a tube of Neosporin on the wound slowed the bleeding enough that we could tape some gauze over it, allowing Miguel to gingerly stand up.

He hobbled up the trail to where his bike lay, explaining that he had launched a small drop, then pointing with his foot to the imprint where his rear tire had touched down. It was a 20-something-foot gap. With his good leg he kicked at a triangular rock in the trail, the one that had washed out his front wheel upon landing and so rudely disrupted his run. He ultimately found a rock with red smudges across the top, the one presumably responsible for the condition of his knee. I thought we would call the ride at this point, but apparently I was the only one. Miguel paced up and down the trail a few meters to loosen up his legs, then remounted his bike and continued at just a marginally slower pace.

I have no delusions that I can ride urban downhill like film stars Chris Van Dine or Marcelo Gutiérrez (also a two-time winner of the Crankworx Whistler Garbanzo DH), but I was in Valparasio two years before urban downhilling burst onto the scene and have been fantasizing about riding that style of track ever since. San Gil is built into the side of a mountain, and like in so many South American towns, the brilliance of Miguel's trail is that it finishes just above one of the city's common pedestrian staircases—although "staircase" may elicit the wrong image. Being at the top of the city, it sees fairly low traffic, so it's been cobbled together and subsequently repaired by the locals who use it. Uneven concrete sidewalks end with hairpin corners into three-foot-wide stairsets, boulders are cemented in place so they don't erode and roll down the hillside, and no one gave a thought to handlebar clearance when building the retaining walls.

Finding no pedestrians on the path, we attacked with fervor, gapping stairs and sliding through corners as we descended into the city.

The final section of stairs empties into a moderately busy street just a block from the city's central square. Miguel, of course, was the first down, and as his bike clanged through the last stairs, several people came out of the convenience store next door to see what was going on. By the time I got there, three riders back, we had a venerable parade escort with the storekeeper and patrons blocking traffic and cheering us on. It was a surreal welcome.

We circled back to the shop, bought some sodas and took a seat on the steps we had just ridden to enjoy dusk before pedaling back to the house.







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PIDIGUA

I started hearing about the Pidigua Trail, named after the nearest town, when I first arrived in San Gil. The area is so inaccessible that even in the glory days of goat farming no one thought to build a camino real there. Instead the goat farmers, for generations upon generations, began walking a footpath that has slowly eroded into the ground.

Being so remote, a lot of circumstances have to line up before a trip to Pidigua happens, and I had just five days left on my visa when I got the chance to check it out. After the Land Rover crawled over log bridges and spun its wheels in 4-low, we finally arrived at the top of a mountain. John, Jamie and I, along with four friends, got kitted up while Mike, graciously running shuttle duty, gave directions on where to meet him.

Despite its legendary status, I had never seen any pictures of the trail, and as we started riding I felt a little deflated. It was a decent trail and there were good views, but it wasn't anything amazing. I also grabbed a handful of front brake for no apparent reason while adjusting my backpack and crashed in the first five minutes, adding a touch of bitterness. Once we had ridden for about 15 minutes, John stopped to regroup everyone and announced that we were now "starting" the trail.

After a sweeping off-camber left, the trail dove into the ravine created from years of use and erosion. It was like nothing I had ever seen, with 10- to 20-foot-high walls of compacted dirt funneling us down the mountain like a bobsled run. We'd pop out onto level ground for a moment, then descend right back in. Chutes dropped into deeper creases, rock-like chunks littered the ground and natural wallrides were everywhere. I was so overwhelmed that I wanted to ride top to bottom in one flowy dream and hike each section 15 times. Arm pump prevented me from making a continuous run, but I decided to see the whole thing first before hiking favorite sections.

Toward the bottom the ditches mellowed and then reversed themselves, so we rode on a little spine through heavy jungle underbrush. Two final steep pitches dropped us into someone's backyard and then out on the street in Pidigua, where Mike was waiting.

The continuity was incredible and I was amazed by how these people, hiking for transportation, had inadvertently built a perfect bike trail that they would never ride. We had passed a few locals walking the trail with bags of produce, and I couldn't help but ponder how different our perception of the trail must be. I had traveled thousands of miles by car, plane, bus and bike to play on the route they use for grocery shopping.

Mike shuttled us for two more runs before we pedaled three hours on dirt roads to a popular swimming hole. As we hung out in a town's center park near the swimming hole, people-watching and eating street food, I decided it was the perfect ride to close my time in Colombia and that I'd pack up my bike the next day.


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RIDING THE FORGOTTEN ARGENTINA RAILROAD

words and photos by
Dan Milner



"It's the most shitty looking, crappiest trail I have ever seen," says Hans Rey, not mincing his words. We're tired, hungry and cold and have found ourselves passing the night in the one-horse Argentinean border town of La Quiaca—a town that seems to exist solely to encourage travelers to leave. Looking north, a concrete bridge spans a trickle of grubby water that separates Argentina from Bolivia, and to the south, extending as far as the eye can see across a desert landscape, is the trail along which we're about to mountain bike. Or perhaps "trail" is too generous a term for a 100-year-old disused railway line.





Completed in 1912 by British engineers, the meter-gauge line that is to host our two-day ride was once the quickest and safest way to travel through the arid and bandit-infested desert north. Subsequent economic depression, then privatization in the 1970s and finally abandonment in 1992, means the steam trains that once plied the Línea Belgrano Norte have long since disappeared. But the line itself remains: a straight, level track slicing through some of the world's most impressive scenery.

It's taken me six years to get to this point, having first laid eyes on this iron-railed remnant of industrial history during a previous bike trip here. During one of those seemingly regular moments of madness, I succumbed to the idea that to mountain bike along this old railway line might make an interesting interlude in my life. It would be a challenge, I reasoned, but no doubt strangely rewarding. Traveling by bike means immersing yourself in your environment. It means seeing things that otherwise pass by too quickly from the seat of a bus. It means coming home with experiences and rewards that are not listed in the guidebook. And so the romantic notion of an adventure was spawned in the way they so often are: peering from the window of an air-conditioned rental as I sped along a silky smooth tarmac road.

Now, as we sit in a café chewing stale pastries and sipping on hot chocolates as part of the Argentinean afternoon-tea tradition, I'm a little hurt by Rey's remark. Don't get me wrong: I have no warmth for this grimy town or our $10 hotel, run by Argentina's laziest proprietor. But the reason that I am here with fellow mountain bikers Rey, Tibor Simai and Rob Summers is that the trip speaks to my sense of what makes a good adventure. This railway is my baby. I've researched it, squinting at its feint form on Google Earth and missing last calls at the local pub while at home pondering logistics and viability. But I realize there is some truth about Rey's comment that is striking a chord in me too. The last bus we took paralleled the railway for 25 miles, allowing us a preview of what we're embarking on, and while adventure is nigh on guaranteed, the actual riding didn't look too promising. Swallowed up by drifts of sand, overgrown by sagebrush and teetering over a dozen broken bridges, my chosen mountain bike trail is no weekend ride in the Surrey hills. I guess it's why no one has tried to ride it before.

TRAVELING BY BIKE MEANS IMMERSING YOURSELF IN YOUR ENVIRONMENT.

IT MEANS SEEING THINGS THAT OTHERWISE PASS BY TOO QUICKLY FROM THE SEAT OF A BUS.



The sun is low, but I can already feel its savage bite as we start our escapade the next morning. Over two days we'll attempt to ride as much of the railway as we can, starting at Abra Pampa and finishing among the cobbled streets of Humahuaca, 60 miles to the south. A decade living near the Bristol and Bath commuter bike path in the U.K. has familiarized me with the easygoing gradients of railway lines converted to bike thoroughfares. Typically they produce the kind of inclines that let you mash gears in never-ending sprints, working on cardiovascular targets while dodging potential muggings.

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But this time it's the altitude that does the mugging. In Abra Pampa's corner shop we wade through a sea of bowler-hat-wearing indigenous women to fill our backpacks with bananas and water before pedaling to the railway line and straight into a 12-mile-long climb. I'm right about the easy gradient, but faced with an incessant headwind and the lung crunch of riding at 11,154 feet, this initial gentle but unrelenting climb proves harder than any of us envisaged. A month of regular turbo-trainer sessions in my garage seems to have done little to help right now, and my legs feel heavy and useless. Repeatedly we're forced off our bikes to climb over barbed-wire fences that now pay little respect to the railway engineers' noble notion of cutting an unimpeded course across the landscape. Herds of llamas and guanaco stand their ground, unaccustomed to being confronted by bikers, and we're forced off the line to roll down the embankment only to have to haul ourselves back up again to continue.

By midmorning we're feeling the full ferocity of the sun. There is no shade here, and in three days' time we'll all be shedding skin like serpents at a clothes swap. The vast altiplano we're traversing is crisscrossed by dozens of small, dry creek beds, each spanned by a railway bridge that hasn't seen maintenance for 20-plus years. Some are intact, their wooden sleeper slabs still evenly spaced about 30 centimeters apart, allowing us to ride across them if we carry momentum, but some wield gaping holes where sleepers have disappeared. Others yet have been reduced to nothing more than a twisted tangle of ironwork. The approach of every bridge brings a tingle of apprehension, and crossing them becomes a game of calculations and nerves.



We're only five miles out of town, but already the feeling of space is immense. Above us, a vast blue sky reaches down to touch the rugged peaks of the Andes. The line's three-foot gauge gives us just enough space to maneuver between the rails, and we swerve around the clumps of prickly brush that thrust unsystematically from the earth and hop over randomly projecting sleepers. With a little momentum, picking a line through the undergrowth begins to deliver a rhythmic flow to the riding, like railing good singletrack.

It becomes apparent that, left untended, the railway is slowly being reabsorbed into the environment by nature. Gopher burrows acne the ground, and adjacent telegraph poles, relieved of their messaging duties, have relaxed their guard. Their broken wires hang limp and their Bakelite fixtures have become platforms for tangled weaverbird nests.

Thankfully for us, the wooden sleepers have long since become buried under drifting sand,





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now baked hard under decades of unrelenting sun, making the riding easier. In places the sleepers have disappeared completely, seized as hallowed building materials by locals lacking trees or a Home Depot. In the absence of such ground anchors, here the rails have become bent and contorted by the desert heat.

We're parched and burnt by the time we reach our first day's finish, Tres Cruces, a small village that is little more than a jumping-off stop for the nearby uranium mine. Accommodations—or, more accurately, lack thereof—have been a big challenge in planning this adventure, with few villages positioned along the line. Some towns in the area, such as Humahuaca or Tilcara, have become tourism hot spots and accommodations are guaranteed, but at tiny Tres Cruces we're taking a gamble. We lose. Locals point us to the one hotel in the village, but clearly it hasn't been open for years. Opting to travel light without camping gear, and now faced with nighttime temperatures below 30 degrees, we have little option but to jump on a bus back to Abra Pampa for the night and return to Tres Cruces at dawn to continue our ride. It's a frustrating turn of events, and in hindsight maybe throwing in a sleeping bag each would have been wise. Then we'd have been able to entertain our grandkids with stories of how we slept out in an old retired railway wagon in a ghost town of a village near a uranium mine.

Nothing wakes you up quite like a 7 a.m. ride in the back of a pickup truck speeding across a desert plateau at 11,150 feet. Still wearing down jackets, we're delivered back at Tres Cruces' abandoned station early enough to get a jump on the heat of the day. We pedal out beneath towering water tanks that once flooded the boilers of steam engines and past rusting signaling pylons. It's like riding through a museum.

We're in good spirits, helped by the start of a gentle descent into the Río Grande valley. We skip across bridges and up the pace to cross lengths of railway left suspended in mid-air by the undercutting action of the adjacent river. Our progress is humbled by a landscape of colorful rock layers, each twisted and thrown into disarray by unfathomable geological forces. We pass a remote hilltop cemetery at 12,500 feet, its iron crosses decorated with rosary beads, ribbons, and cheap plastic posies. Scattered animal bones bleached white by the sun and the desiccating corpse of a llama serve to remind us of the possibilities should something go wrong out here. "But what can?" we ask ourselves. After all, we're just riding along an old railway line, the shortest and easiest way from point A to point B.

And then the bridges loom into view. Each is perhaps 200 feet long and suspended 100 feet above a chocolate-colored Río Grande, and there are two to cross. Even encountered separately, each could be a contender for the most mentally challenging part of our two-day adventure. Too long and with too many gaping holes due to missing sleepers to try to ride across, we'll be walking these. But like their smaller brethren we've already negotiated, the bridges have no walkway, no handrails—only the rails and wooden sleepers and gaps between them, lots of gaps.



I gingerly step onto the first bridge, trusting the decrepit ironwork while cursing the blustery cross-wind that has arrived to add to the drama. Never good with heights, I fight the urge to peer down into the void that beckons between each sleeper, hoping my cleated bike shoes will give me the sure-footedness I need to stay upright. An attempt to wheel my bike quickly fails, its front tire dropping into the first broken gap and the rest of the bike nearly following into the abyss. My impoverished railway-bridge-crossing skills nearly cost me my bike. I wrench it out and haul it above the rails, wondering how or where you might be able to practice and hone such skills before coming on such trips.

By the time I reach the "safe" end of the second bridge, my mouth is dry, my legs are wobbling and my forearm is cramping from the vice-like grip I've exerted on my bike. But as I slump down onto the railway siding and regain control over my breathing, I realize the worst is behind me. Even from behind the windscreen of my rental car six years earlier, I knew these two bridges would present the biggest challenge should I come back to ride this railway line. With no idea of how safe they were, I'd even entertained thoughts of lugging an inflatable pack-raft with us to use to cross the river instead.

I watch as my fellow mountain bikers make the same crossing behind me, each caught up in his own mix of adrenaline, focus and sense of accomplishment. "For every tough mountain bike trail, there is always one harder," I think, and for every remote adventure, there is always another just as unique. I realize that while the adrenaline rush of riding somewhere new, somewhere no one has ridden before, comes thick and fast, that buzz is ephemeral. For me, the lasting resonance of adventure is in what you learn about yourself and in those who share your experiences.

THE LASTING RESONANCE OF ADVENTURE IS IN WHAT YOU LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF AND IN THOSE WHO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES.



I swing my leg back over my bike. Humahuaca is still another 20 miles away—20 miles along one of the "crappiest" trails I have ever ridden. We set off again, not knowing what lies around the corner, but knowing that so far it has become fun. I look back. Even Rey is smiling. DR


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SINGLETRACK TO SCHOOL:

HOW ONE ARKANSAS TOWN IS SECURING ITS CYCLING FUTURE

WORDS BY FRANK MAGUIRE | PHOTOS BY SCOTT SCHOEN

Since you're reading Dirt Rag, it's a safe bet that you think bikes are a pretty great human achievement—right up there with sliced bread, space travel and Saturday morning cartoons. As with all great inventions, bikes should be measured by their ability to change and improve people's daily lives. I think we can all agree that more people riding them would make the world a better place—more smiles per miles, as the saying goes.

One way to get more Americans cycling is to start them young. You, yourself, probably began riding early: a parent running behind you, a steadying hand on your back until it was no longer needed. And if you're honest with yourself, that love of riding is what you looked for when you returned to two wheels as an adult and developed what is now a lifelong passion. Is it possible to engage kids at an early age, instill that commitment and joy in a way that will let them skip over the "too cool to ride" phase and continue pedaling into adulthood and beyond? A rethinking of how kids are introduced to bikes as well as singletrack is leading a new model of future biking citizens in many places across the country.

But to actually get kids on bikes goes against two other trends in America: increasingly sedentary lifestyles and the fear of what happens when your child is out of your sight. Bikes, particularly mountain bikes, mean both motion and independence. Exploring trails and the world beyond where the sidewalk ends is a lifelong lesson in self-sufficiency and confidence. Nationally, the Safe Routes to School program has opened the door to more bikes as transportation in many communities. Physical education classes in some places feature fleets of bikes, and now communities across the country are starting to add singletrack to the mix. By introducing kids to the versatility of bikes in a somewhat structured format, these school systems are broadening their role in developing well-rounded children while bucking the culture of fear. No community has done as much to make lifelong riders out of kids as Bentonville, Arkansas.

Bentonville may not be the first place that jumps to mind when you think "outdoor lifestyle." The corporate home and birthplace of Walmart, Bentonville was a small rural community until the 1990s, when Walmart began requiring its vendors to open offices in town. This business decision led to a rather quick population boom, with the number of inhabitants growing from less than 12,000 in 1990 to more than 40,000 today. Such growth could have quickly swallowed up the town, but a solid dose of civic pride and philanthropy led to keeping the small-town charm while prepping future generations for a life on two wheels.

With a quaint town square and some significant public open-space areas nearby, Bentonville was able to follow the lead of other communities and develop a healthy bicycle master plan

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For 2015, we're happy to report that the program continues to grow. In addition to our traveling crew we are adding nine regional team members to the roster, greatly increasing our outreach.

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Mar. 13-15: Sierra Vista, AZ
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> A BIKE SHOP WAS ALSO CREATED IN THE HIGH SCHOOL AS BOTH PART OF A NECESSARY MAINTENANCE PLAN AND AS A VOCATIONAL-TRAINING COURSE.

to connect the town's neighborhoods. The Slaughter Pens trail network, connected to the Razorback Greenway and just a few quick minutes from the town square, quickly developed a national reputation for quality trails, including a freeride area, dirt jumps and a pump track. All of these things could exist, though, in their own vacuum, serving a small segment of the population that was already exploring on two wheels. In 2011, however, the community at large began to change that.

At first, the bikes-in-schools program started pretty modestly, with just 23 bikes and needed accessories purchased for the P.E. program at Lincoln Jr. High School. The success of that program sparked the community to pursue a much larger grant from the Walton Foundation and funding from other sources to create a true school-system-wide program. Called "Trail Time," the initiative set a goal to launch the bike program in all 17 schools in the Bentonville School District. Five hundred Trek bikes were purchased for multiple schools, and a bike shop was also created in the high school as both part of a necessary maintenance plan and as a vocational-training course. Then a curriculum was created. As Alan Ley, the head of Bike Bentonville, said, "The trails [have] become an outdoor classroom."

Such grand-vision projects usually take time for their impact to be felt, but according to Scott Schoen, the manager at Phat Tire Bike Shop in Bentonville, the effect was immediate. "Within six weeks you started seeing kids on trails," he said. "Fifth- and sixth-graders—not just high school kids." That impact wasn't just felt on the trails themselves, but also in the bike shop. "We had kids bringing their parents in, saying, 'I want the one like what we have at school,' meaning Treks," Schoen continued. This is a big deal, since the bike advocates (including Schoen) made the case to spend extra money to get quality bikes over a big-box brand. The advocates knew how crucial it was to make sure the kids' first experience on trails had the highest chance for enjoyment rather than frustration. This might have meant fewer bikes initially, but it made the likelihood of long-term success possible.

I had a chance last fall to check out the trails myself while visiting the region. Over the course of several days I got to cruise multiple times back and forth along the northern section of the Razorback Greenway that connects the various nodes of singletrack (including the Slaughter Pen Trails). From my hotel, it was a quick two-block pedal to the first stretch of dirt, the All-American Trail near Crystal Bridges Museum. That first taste of trail led pretty intuitively to the next and then the next one after that, drawing me into what was nearly a 20-mile ride. The layout maximizes the terrain and features, with rolling contour trails punctuated by sharp-edged rock gardens. One particularly cool stretch near Lake Bella Vista has the trail skirting along the edge of a rock outcropping that typifies the area and adds a visual mind game of risk versus reward.

My visit coincided with the Slaughter Pen Jam, the community-wide celebration of trails held every year in September. This year it was an official program of the Bentonville Parks and Recreation Department, meaning that whatever it may have lost in its street

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cred was made up for in scale and scope. From a trials and BMX demonstration that was successfully integrated into the monthly First Friday on the Square event, to movie night in a town park, the Jam has become a continuation of the town's efforts to embrace cycling in all its facets. That extends to the cross-country races, where the junior categories are some of the larger groups, and the legions of groms making their rounds to vendor booths looking for stickers and swag show the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for gaming conventions.

At one point in my exploration of Bentonville, I took a side detour to Lincoln Jr. High School to check out what it meant to have the schools connected to singletrack. The small, probably less-than-10-acre piece of green space around the school had been transformed into a trail playground. A short loop, complete with berms and boardwalks, created an inviting diversion to the standard entrance to the school. As if on cue, two kids who couldn't have been more than eight rode up out of the trails. Deep in their own world, they barely acknowledged me as they continued their conversation and turned onto the next section of trail.

If this is what the future holds for communities that put forth the effort to embrace bikes, I am all for it. By elevating bikes at an early age to something beyond "toy" status and into something that expands horizons, communities have a chance to create a self-sufficiency that seems to be vanishing in America. Because if they can do it in Bentonville, Arkansas, then you can take the dirt to school just about anywhere.

SINGLETRACK SIDEWALKS

COLORADO'S TAKE ON THE PROGRAM

Although Bentonville might be the largest and most complete singletrack program in the country, there are smaller-scale efforts that you can look to as examples. In Eagle, Colorado, a much more low-key use of public dirt is being proposed, but will still be a fun diversion for kids (old and young) commuting. Mike McCormick of Breck Epic fame was inspired to take advantage of the stretches of dirt that line the paved path leading to his kid's school, after watching how much fun the kids were having taking the social trails off to the side. For McCormick, it sparked the realization that his kids can't be the only ones who could benefit from such play.

In 2012, McCormick started talking up the idea with other riders and soon started working with the local club, Hardscrabble Trails Coalition, and Momentum Trail Concepts, a local trail-building company, to approach the Eagle town council and propose "Singletrack Sidewalks." The citizen-led effort gained traction quickly because it tapped into a feeling of "let kids be

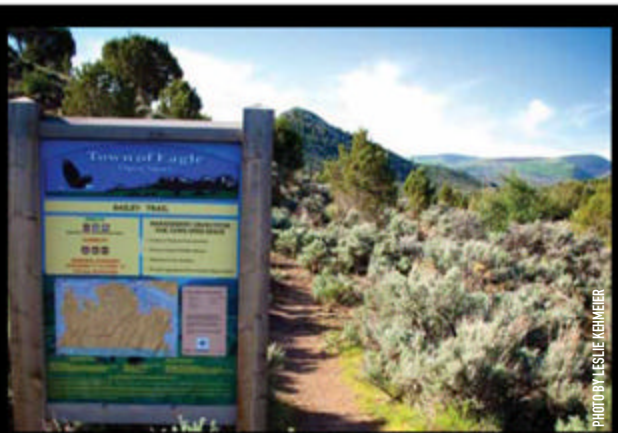


PHOTO BY LESLIE KEHMEIER

kids" while not asking the town government for any hard-to-find funding. Last November, the council approved the plan unanimously, and now the community is looking at moving dirt this spring. Over the course of the next five years, the goal is to connect seven different neighborhoods in town with the two school buildings as well as the various trailheads, opening up a much larger world for all.



Some things are just meant to be together.



The new 30mm wide, 425g Velocity Blunt SS rims, laced to Industry Nine Classic Mountain hubs, using DT Swiss Competition spokes, built by hand in The Wheel Department, makes for the best XC wheelset on the market. Oh, and it's all made in America.

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PHOTO: LESLIE KEHMEIER

Wheelbase: 47.7"/47.7"
Top Tube: 24.7"/24.8"
Head Angle: 68.2°/67.5°
Seat-Tube Angle: 74°
Bottom Bracket: 14.13"/13.78"
Rear Center: 17.4"/17.5"
Weight: 26.1 lbs. w/o pedals
specs based on size tested

TREK REMEDY 9.9 29

TESTER: Matt Kasprzyk AGE: 35 HEIGHT: 6'3" WEIGHT: 185 lbs. INSEAM: 34"

Amidst the 27.5 and fat bike boom Trek has been perfecting a 29er that redefines 140 mm travel, big-wheeled bikes. Sure, there's a lot of proven Trek features that riders are familiar with, but the latest iteration of the Remedy is a mind-expanding ride experience because of two major design features: the Boost 148 rear hub and the new RE:aktiv rear shock.

Trek's Boost 148 is a new rear hub standard, but before we start hating on evolution, let's take a little time to at least humor why this makes sense. The rear hub spacing has been increased by 3 mm on each side. That might not seem like much, but it opened the door for Trek's engineers to hit the quantitative numbers they were aiming for in terms of frame and wheel stiffness while allowing for contemporary design features like a PressFit BB shell with ISCG mounts, as well as the ability to fit larger chainrings while maintaining a proper chainline for 1x drives, without increasing Q-factor. But, maybe most importantly, this is not proprietary tech. Trek has left this as an open design. Soon we'll see 148 offerings by companies like DT Swiss, Shimano and I9—all of whom are already on board. Rumors abound that Trek's 27.5 trail bikes will be using this standard in 2016 as well.

The wider hub increases 29er wheel stiffness by 15 percent, according to Trek, and goes a long way toward eliminating reservations about the lateral stiffness of a larger wheel diameter. The only question left is: When will we see wider front hubs for 29ers? It's definitely coming soon, with recent confirmation of a 15x110 standard to supplant the current 15x100.

The other major story here is the RE:aktiv rear shock that was developed using technology from Penske Racing's experience designing Formula 1 racing suspension. This regressively damped system uses a spring-loaded high-speed compression circuit that remains closed until enough pressure pushes it open. With the high-speed circuit closed, the firmly damped low-speed valve controls pedaling motions. Larger impacts open the high-speed circuit and the damping rate drops, allowing more travel to soak up sharp hits. On really big hits, the damping rate ramps back up to regain control of the travel.

Unlike Specialized's Brain suspension that senses the direction of input, the RE:aktiv system is very sensitive to the velocity of impacts. Feedback from pedaling, or rider movements, is too slow to activate the valve. While pedaling it feels like a firmly damped and efficient climber, but as soon as you start descending at speed, the shock senses those fast impacts and fully opens up with a quick and seamless transition. The rougher the terrain the quicker it reacts, but there is never a noticeable transition or perceivable delay back and forth.

The CTD settings change the preload on the RE:aktiv piston. Regardless of preload settings, when opened the valve works the same, so you get the seamless changes in damping in all three modes, but a higher amount of force is needed to activate the high speed circuit in Trail or Climb.

What does all this axle width and car-racing tech feel like on the trails? Well, it's tough going back to a bike that doesn't use this shock.

The Remedy seems to float over rough terrain. It skips through the rough and rounds the tops off protruding rocks. The rear wheel always seems in contact with the ground, and I felt in total control of the rear end of the bike. It felt completely balanced, where the back end was working



PHOTO: MATT KASPRZYK







Our early production model did not feature the Fox Factory Series Float with Kashima Coat, but it still amazed.

PRICE: $8,800 SIZES: 15.5, 17.5, 18.5, 19.5, 21.5 (TESTED) ONLINE: trekbikes.com

in tandem with the front suspension. The 140 mm travel RockShox Pike was perfectly paired with the RE:aktiv performance.

Trek spent a lot of time collecting quantitative data before any prototype was drafted. On paper the geometry isn't revolutionary, but combined with an incredible suspension system and the stiffest aluminum wheels that I've used, the resulting impression is that this bike is hands down the best long travel 29er I've ridden. The fact that Trek's enduro team often races on the Remedy when the longer-travel Slash is an option goes a long way toward explaining just how capable this bike is.

Control at speed through rough sections is noticeably better than many longer-travel bikes out there. In addition to how much fun it is going down, it climbs very well and there isn't any fiddling with knobs when you get to the top. A lot of bikes pedal well or descend great, but what's remarkable is how well the new Remedy switches between pedaling efficiency and absolutely murdering descents without the need to adjust its CTD settings. Trek's Mino Link allows you to adjust the head tube angle by half a degree and change the BB height by up to 10 mm, but that feature is set-and-forget for me. After trying the slacker setting, I found the Goldilocks numbers that agreed with me during all of my trail riding. The bike fit well, providing immediate confidence while riding and leaving me with zero desire to change any of the stock components, which consisted of a SRAM XX1 drivetrain and Shimano's potent XTR Trail brakes.

If this bike asked me to get on a plane to Trektown in a South American jungle, I'd grab that Kool-Aid and say, "All aboard!" Sign me up for the next two-wheeled religious experience. This is a must-ride, and I'd recommend any of the carbon or aluminum models with the RE:aktiv shock to just about anyone who is shopping for one of the best trail bikes out there.







PHOTOS: BRICE SHIRBACH

Wheelbase: 42.7"
Top Tube: 23"
Head Angle: 66.5°
Seat-Tube Angle: 71°
Bottom Bracket: 13.5"
Rear Center: 17"
Weight: 30.3 lbs.
specs based on size tested

INTENSE TRACER 275 ALLOY FOUNDATION

TESTER: Mike Cushionbury AGE: 45 HEIGHT: 5'10" WEIGHT: 155 lbs. INSEAM: 32"

Intense has carved its niche as a high-end manufacturer of some of the most desirable frames in the mountain bike business. At one time it was an operation that only served up American-made aluminum frames and select parts kits. Recently it set the industry on fire with the $10,000 carbon Tracer 275C with a top-shelf Factory build kit. I had the opportunity to put extensive miles on the T275C Factory early last year and called it one of the best-performing do-it-all trail bikes ever. Obviously the parts package and 26.4-pound weight played a nice role, but the fact remains that the Tracer platform—with 27.5-inch wheels, 160 mm travel VPP suspension and a 66.5-degree head angle—was pure joy to ride anywhere and everywhere. So what if I told you Intense has introduced the same frame design in aluminum with a parts group that allows the company to offer it at a retail price that's well over a third less than the cost of the T275C?

Meet the Tracer 275 Alloy Foundation, a $2,999 version that delivers maximum performance as well as being made entirely in the brand's Temecula, California, factory. Not only is the frame manufactured completely in the USA, but it's also painted Day-Glo orange near the Intense factory. Intense even gets its bike boxes sourced from a neighboring business.

Last year when Intense introduced the carbon Tracer it slackened the head angle by a degree and added 10 mm of travel at max setting compared to the existing aluminum frames. This year all the metal bikes have followed suit and have upgraded to the exact same proven geometry and adjustable-travel range (140 mm to 160 mm via a bolt on the link) as their carbon siblings. It's a small but noticeable performance difference. The head angle was changed because designers found that with the carbon bike the angle made it more stable on steep sections without giving up any slower speed performance in tighter, twistier sections. When riding the bike on the East Coast, which often transitions from short, steep drop-ins to flatter, rougher sections with serpentine turns and slower speeds, I found the Tracer Foundation had no limitations or objections. Adding to this, of course, is the snappy feel of the 27.5-inch wheels.

The ultra-long 47.2-inch wheelbase provides predictable stability without feeling like it hampers performance in switchbacks or when a degree of body English is needed to change direction. This bit of agility is helped in part by the 17-inch chainstays. For comparison, the Tracer's wheelbase is in the realm of what full-on downhill bikes were using not that many years ago, but somehow the bike's geometry pulls it all together so it doesn't feel as long as it measures.

Intense's VPP suspension, controlled by an X Fusion O2 RL Air shock and matched to an X Fusion Sweep RL2 160 mm travel fork, gets the job done in fine fashion. Both the front and rear felt tender off the top with nice progression through the middle, and both also felt very balanced, especially in rougher, stutter-bump sections. Given the price point, it's hard to complain about the shock's on or off lockout compared to multiple settings so readily available, but I will say Intense's version of VPP begs for a middle-platform setting. The lockout available on both the front and rear was just that: fully locked and most useful on only the smoothest of climbs.

Kudos to Intense for spec'ing the frame with a full Shimano SLX











PRICE: $2,999 SIZES: S, M (TESTED), L, XL ONLINE: intensecycles.com

drivetrain (10-speed cassette and 38/24 chainrings) and Shimano M506 disc brakes. As a group, everything worked in perfect harmony, no doubt adding to the bike's overall trail confidence—especially the brakes. Shimano's lower-end stoppers continue to be quality performers. To reach the price point, some parts corners have to be cut; in this case, the Intense-branded wheels and accessories do their job but are nothing to write home about. Also, expect to pay a few hundred dollars to add a dropper post—seemingly a must for a bike this style. The seat tube is ported for an internally routed post, with no frame tabs for external routing. Intense has three aluminum complete-bike options that also include the $5,999 Pro and $5,650 Expert, both with Kindshock LEV Integra dropper posts, for comparison.

At a weight of 30.3 pounds for the Foundation build, this is very competitive for any aluminum bike at this travel, and it's excellent for the price. Any last niggles? The 2.25-inch-wide wire bead Maxxis Ardent tires seemed too narrow for the Tracer. Upgrading to a wider tire will improve the bike's downhill and technical gravitas. Going with a lighter folding bead should also cut a bit of that already respectable weight where it matters most.

This Tracer 275 Alloy Foundation was a blast to ride. It's certainly capable of being a fun daily driver for a rider who puts downhill speed above everything, and it's also a good option for park riders and shuttle hounds who may find themselves doing a bit of all-mountain exploring. The Tracer's well-documented and proven VPP suspension and parts performance make it one of the best available at its price point and also very competitive with many bikes costing twice as much.







PHOTOS: JUSTIN STEINER

Wheelbase: 44.1"
Top Tube: 23.8"
Head Angle: 70°
Seat-Tube Angle: 73°
Bottom Bracket: 12.8"
Rear Center: 17.4"
Weight: 27.2 lbs.
specs based on size tested

IBIS RIPLEY 29

TESTER: Eric McKeegan AGE: 41 HEIGHT: 5'11" WEIGHT: 155 lbs. INSEAM: 31"

Anyone who followed the saga of the Ripley knows this bike wasn't easy to birth. Between a completely new dw-link system that uses eccentrics rather than links and a switch to a different factory in the middle of development, to say this was a difficult labor would be an understatement.

Ibis stuck it out, and this bike is an impressive heir to the Ripley name, first used on a John Castellano–designed aluminum softail with 1.25 inches of travel. That bike was part of the pivotless craze driven largely by Ibis 1.0 and bikes like the pivotless 5-inch-travel Bow-Ti. Now executed in modern carbon fiber, the form factor of the Ripley has changed, but the ride remains the most important design criteria.

Ibis is no longer afraid of pivots, and the Ripley pushes the envelope again with the tiny eccentrics standing in for the links in the Dave Weagle–designed suspension. With the bike originally conceived as a 100 mm travel race-ready 29er, the eccentrics seemed like a perfect solution to the desired geometry, weight and performance goals. But after spending enough time on longer-travel trail bikes, Ibis deemed more travel was better and the whole system was rethought for this current 120 mm rear end.

The swingarm of the Ripley covers up most of the interesting bits of the suspension, but keeps with the Roxy Lo aesthetic shared by all the modern Ibises: organic and flowing, yet purposeful and distinct. Hiding the pivots from sight also shelters them from much of the muck that ends up on the bike, which should help to extend bearing life. The bearings are off-the-shelf units, so no worries about replacement when the time comes.

The eccentrics do require extra attention when servicing, including using a thread-locking compound and lowering the torque on the bolts. There have been some running changes to the hardware and fastening torque over the first few years, but everything seems squared away now and my tester was click- and squeak-free.

Ibis has a big selection of build kits with 1x and 2x options from Shimano and SRAM and forks from RockShox and Fox. I rode the Shimano XT option with an upgrade to the Cane Creek Inline rear shock and Thomson dropper post. The 120 mm Fox Float 32 CTD fork can be swapped for a longer-travel 140 mm RockShox Pike or Fox 34—something I would recommend for bigger or harder-charging riders.

The geometry is an interesting balance between old school and new school. The head angle with a 120 mm fork is an even 70 degrees, chainstays come in at 17.4 inches and the bottom bracket hangs out at 12.8 inches. These numbers are pretty standard these days, but the 23.8-inch top tube and 16.3-inch reach are substantially shorter than many similar trail bikes, forcing me to use a 90 mm stem and 740 mm bars to create a proper-sized cockpit. The shorter top tube means the wheelbase, at 44.1 inches, is quite short for a bike of this size.

All that geometry adds up to a bike that feels nimble and likes to be steered. Small inputs go a long way, giving the bike the feeling of a confident cross-country machine. The longer stem keeps some weight on the front wheel, and combined with a rear suspension that stays up in its travel, this bike climbs steeps with poise and confidence. On the flats, that same suspension is efficient enough to race cross-country, should the mood strike, and with a lightweight build kit it wouldn't be at much of









PRICE: $5,850 SIZES: S, M, L (TESTED), XL ONLINE: ibiscycles.com

a disadvantage against a pure XC race bike.

While nimble in the tight and twisties, there is some confidence lost in the steep and treacherous. This is mostly due to the longer stem and shorter front center compared to other 29er trail bikes, but it is mitigated in large part with a dropper post.

On less steep, choppy terrain, the dw-link suspension works its magic, handling multiple hits in a controlled manner and using full travel with no harsh bottoming-out sensations. The fancy Inline rear shock allows tuning for more or less small-bump compliance, but compared to the most supple suspension designs out there, this one feels slightly harsh on smaller hits. This is a minor quibble, and the suspension character is very well matched to the nimble feel of this bike.

With most recently introduced 29er trail bikes taking their cues from the enduro-cation of geometry, the Ripley stands out as appealing to a rider who cut his or her teeth on bikes in the days of longer stems and steeper angles. A longer-travel fork would definitely make it a more aggressive descender without losing any of the snappy pedaling behavior that makes it such a joy to ride for hours at a time. If your shopping list includes choices like the Kona Process 111 and Transition Smuggler, this might not be the bike for you. But if you are considering the Scott Genius 29er or Trek Fuel EX 29, add the Ripley to your wish list.

My somewhat odd-sounding takeaway from my time on this bike: It reminds me of a hardtail. Once I got the suspension dialed to where I wanted it, I rarely thought about it anymore and flipped lockout levers only when I was on pavement. With complete bikes ranging from $3,950 to up in the $10K range, the Ripley is in no way cheap, but it is very competitive.





PHOTOS: GREG GALLIANO

Wheelbase: 47.2"
Top Tube: 25"
Head Angle: 66.5°
Seat-Tube Angle: 73°
Bottom Bracket: 13.7"
Rear Center: 17.8"
Weight: 28.6 lbs.
specs based on size tested

DIAMONDBACK MISSION PRO 27.5

TESTER: Adam Newman AGE: 34 HEIGHT: 6'2" WEIGHT: 170 lbs. INSEAM: 34"

When you think of Diamondback bikes, you likely think of two things: its line of kids' and entry-level bikes, found in big-box department stores, and their hard-hitting bikes, the likes of which you'd see Kelly McGarry backflipping over huge canyon gaps. The brand's mountain bike line trends toward the latter end of that spectrum, with its suspension models aimed mostly at the trail-to-gravity crowds.

The Mission Pro is the halo bike in the mountain bike line, and its fluorescent-orange paint should attract all-mountain and enduro riders like moths to a flame. There they will find all the details they could expect, including a tapered head tube, ISCG-05 mounts, 142x12 rear thru axle, internal dropper-post routing and easy-to-service external cable routing that runs along the top of the down tube. It's worth mentioning the paint again: It's a crazy color that is pretty much impossible to photograph. I love it.

WE MADE LITERALLY EVERYTHING BETTER FROM THE OLD MISSION.

The Mission Pro's 160 mm of travel moves through the linkage-driven single-pivot suspension now known as Knucklebox Migration, an evolution of the large linkage found on the previous Mission design and other Diamondback bikes. Diamondback says the design was created to move the suspension components farther forward in the frame to make room for the larger 27.5-inch wheel and also lower to drop the bike's center of gravity. Increased travel from the previous 150 mm Mission required a longer-stroke shock, and the revised swingarm shape is much stiffer, Diamondback says, thanks to a larger seatstay bridge.

"We made literally everything better from the old Mission," said Diamondback athlete Eric Porter, who had a huge hand in creating the new bike. "For me, this bike is much more versatile and fun than the old Mission or my 29er," he said, noting that he frequently chose the Mission over his downhill bike even when riding in the bike park.

Controlled by a Fox Float X CTD shock, Diamondback intentionally created a very "linear to slightly progressive" leverage curve to give better small-bump compliance and perceived travel. I have to say the design accomplishes just that—moving remarkably like a coil-over shock. As such it remains quite active over small, fast hits and I was able to use all of the bike's travel without ever feeling the bottom-out bumper.

The Knucklebox suspension is accompanied up front by the Fox Float 34 CTD fork stretched to 160mm of travel. While many of you might be asking, "Where is the Fox 36 fork?", it's worth pointing out that the 2015 Mission Pro was in production before the Fox 36 was released. Diamondback said if it had been available, it absolutely would have been chosen. The 34 fork performs well, but has a tendency to sink into its mid-stroke easily, especially under hard braking, thus steepening the 66.5-degree head-tube angle even further.

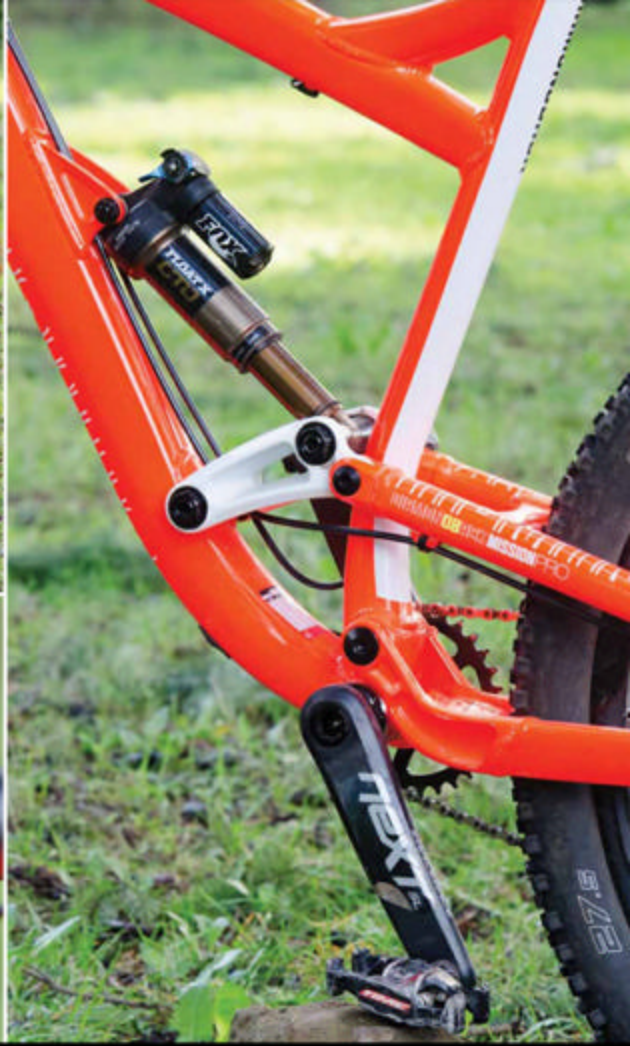
Yes, while 66.5 was a number common to downhill bikes a few years ago, these days it isn't nearly as slack as the competition, which is now down to 65 degrees or less. Paired with 17.8-inch chainstays, the Mission Pro has a less playful attitude than some of its hooligan-inspired peers.



PHOTOS: ADAM NEWMAN







PRICE: $6,500 SIZES: S, M, L, XL (TESTED) ONLINE: diamondback.com

It can cover ground downhill in a hurry, but mostly does so with the wheels firmly on the ground.

While the long, 47.2-inch wheelbase adds to stability at speed, so does the incredible confidence afforded by the Shimano XT brakes. Combined with the traction of the Schwalbe Hans Dampf tires, they can glue your eyeballs to the inside of your goggles. They say great brakes make you faster, and this was certainly proven true on the Mission Pro.

Clearly this 30.93-pound bike puts a priority on descending, but I was impressed with its mountain-goat abilities as well. I don't mean it's a World Cup XC bike, but with the Fox Float X CTD lever left open, it delivers impressive traction over technical terrain as long as you're not in a huge hurry. The long chainstays and active suspension keep the wheels on the ground, propelling you forward over crux moves. Trail mode offers a little more poise, but I usually left it open on technical climbs to make use of the added compliance.

Sitting at the top of the three-bike Mission lineup, the Pro has the price tag to show for it: $6,500 is the MSRP, though its actual street price is usually a bit lower. It's a tough comparison against a nicely equipped Specialized Enduro, Santa Cruz Nomad or Trek Slash each of which can be had for less, though Diamondback touts its burly aluminum frame as being more durable than the carbon-fiber competition. The other two Mission models retail for $2,800 and $3,800.

I had the opportunity to ride the Mission Pro in all sorts of terrain, from backcountry trails to lift-served bike parks, and I was extremely impressed with its versatility. If you like to go on a lot of self-shuttled gravity rides and favor speed over style, it's an excellent choice, though the price could make it a hard sell.





PHOTOS: GREG GALLIANO



PHOTO: JUSTIN STEINER

Wheelbase: 44.1"
Top Tube: 23.5"
Head Angle: 70.5°
Seat-Tube Angle: 73° (effective)
Bottom Bracket: 12.7"
Rear Center: 17.3" - 18.1"
Weight: 23.2 lbs. (4.3 lbs. frame only)
specs based on size tested

CARVER GNARVESTER FRAME

TESTER: Eric McKeegan AGE: 41 HEIGHT: 5'11" WEIGHT: 155 lbs. INSEAM: 31"

PRICE: $1,300 (FRAME ONLY) SIZES: 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 (TESTED), 20, 21, 22, 23 ONLINE: CARVERBIKES.COM

In the emerging world of 29+ bikes, frame material has been limited to mostly steel options. Readers of this magazine should be well aware that we love us some steel bikes, but it is always hard to resist the siren song of the magic metal: titanium.

Carver has been designing stock and custom Ti frames for many years, using a factory in the Far East for production. We've been happy with the quality of the previous frames we've tested, and the Gnarvester continues this tradition. Titanium is notoriously difficult to shape, but every tube on this bike is bent or manipulated in some fashion for things like tire clearance or standover. The flat plate used on the driveside chainstay allows for plenty of tire clearance and surprisingly short chainstays (440–460 mm) based on tire size. This fine machine was built up from a combination of new and used parts, in both singlespeed and 1x10 configurations. There are no front derailleur provisions, so a 1x drivetrain is the only option here. The slider dropouts are available with just about any 135/142 axle configuration out there, including singlespeed-specific. A split rear dropout can accommodate a belt drive as well, making this a hugely versatile frame.

Without trying that hard, I was able to build it up at 23.4 pounds, and it felt amazingly quick for such a chunky looking bike. The Gnarvester felt right at home as a singlespeed, slicing through tight terrain and taking full advantage of the massive traction provided by those big tires.

As much as I love riding singlespeeds, I was much happier with this bike with a 1x10 drivetrain. The gear range makes me much more apt to go for longer exploratory rides, which seems to really tap into this bike's underlying personality.

The geometry is best classified as neutral, which is perfect for a frame like this. But before you write this off as a mild-mannered explorer, the name Gnarvester isn't just slapped on here to try to toughen up the bike's image. After installing a dropper, the dark side became exposed. I've ridden very few bikes that so seamlessly transition from big-tired touring to technical trail carnivore with nothing but 125 mm of seat-post droppage.

Combined with a Whisky carbon fork, the chassis was a wonderful blend of stiffness for pedaling and steering accuracy, with a hint of the smooth ride titanium is known for. I was expecting the head angle to feel too steep for higher speeds or rougher terrain, but I was perfectly satisfied with the steep-sounding 70.5 degrees. The bent top tube provides some additional standover clearance, but it slopes back up to a surprisingly long seat tube, which might limit dropper-post options for shorter-legged riders.

With fat bikes and enduro stealing most of the thunder these days, I sincerely hope we see continued development of 29+ bikes. For rigid trail bikes and mixed-terrain adventure touring, there is no better option. I'm glad to see Carver design such a solid addition to the available 29+ options.

What complaints I can muster are few. One bottle mount and no rack mounts aren't ideal for a bike so well suited to touring and long rides. The 31.8-inch seat tube is ideal for a dropper, but there are no cable guides for the remote lever. I managed to find my way around all of this with rackless bikepacking bags and a few zip ties. Dropper-post cable routing will be added to future production runs, Carver tells us.

Let's add up the positives of the Gnarvester: excellent geometry, corrosion-proof frame material, adjustable dropouts with many axle options, attainable price (for titanium) and nine frame sizes. Assuming the price is right for your wallet, this bike gets a big stamp of approval from me.

Feeling like the wallet is a wee bit too thin for titanium? An aluminum version of the Gnarvester is in the works, priced at less than half of the Ti frame. This should be another great non-steel option for a big-wheeled, big-tire build.

PHOTO: MIKE CUSHIONBURY



STAN'S NOTUBES ZTR VALOR WHEELS $1,900

BY MIKE CUSHIONBURY





Stan's NoTubes was slow to the draw when it came to producing a carbon-rimmed wheelset, and in some aspects it's not surprising. The company's range of tubeless aluminum rim and hub combos has been among the best available. Personally, I've been using various builds of the brand's offerings on my own bikes for years and have never felt pressed to want a carbon version. That was until I finally saw and rode the ZTR Valor carbon wheelset.

Part of the delay, according to Stan's, was that they wanted to make sure the carbon wheels were true to the NoTubes design in every aspect, including low sidewalls and an internal rim width that matches the aluminum ZTR Race Gold at 21.3 mm. Another major priority was that the carbon rims have NoTubes' patented Bead Socket Technology, which is a short inner sidewall and shallow drop channel that's the same shape as the tire bead to lock the tire onto the rim. Experience with this on the ZTR Race, Crest and Arch aluminum wheels has shown it to be one of the most effective tubeless systems in existence. The rims are built to reliable 3.30Ti hubs front and rear, which have easily interchangeable end caps for nearly every axle type.

The look of the carbon lay-up is outstanding and, like all NoTubes wheels, they came taped up with flashy red valve stems installed. Tire installation was a breeze, requiring just a floor pump and a little soapy water on the sidewall and tire valve to snap the tire into place. Weight for the set (with an XD freehub) came to 1,350 grams with valve stems. It's interesting to note that these weigh nearly 90 grams less than the premium Race Gold set, which has a recommended rider weight limit of 170 pounds, and nearly 280 grams less than the Crest, which has a 190-pound recommended weight limit. In comparison, the carbon Valors have a 230-pound rider weight limit.

As expected for a wheelset this light, the Valors felt quick and snappy. While certainly laterally stiffer than their aluminum counterparts, which is readily felt during hard cornering, they aren't overly stiff or harsh like some carbon rims can be in jarring, rough terrain, transmitting vibration to the rider. Obviously some resonance is absorbed through low tire pressure (low-20s psi). NoTubes did a great job refining the ride quality. After a full summer and early winter of abuse, the rims remained scuff free and the hubs maintenance free.

For cross-country riding and racing, the Valors are at the top of the carbon-wheel heap. The increase in recommended rider weight limit matched to a decrease in wheel weight compared to the rest of the Stan's NoTubes line is an impressive feat. While these are my current go-to cross-country wheels, there is one question that may come up: Are they $930 better than the Olympic and World Cup–race proven NoTubes ZTR Race Gold wheels? If ultra light weight matched to carbon's resistance to bending and coming out of true is what you're after I'd say the answer is yes. **notubes.com**

PHOTOS: JUSTIN STEINER

HAYES PRIME COMP DISC BRAKES $115 PER WHEEL

BY ERIC MCKEEGAN





Hayes can largely be credited with creating a disc brake with the correct ratio of performance, reliability and price that led to the widespread acceptance of hydraulic stoppers on mountain bikes. The Prime is Hayes' flagship disc brake, with the Comp model tested here offering a less expensive and less featured version of the top-of-the-line and more expensive Pro model.

The lever is well shaped for single-finger use and is adjustable for reach with a well-protected aluminum dial. The lever travel arc can make lever pull feel awkward when they're adjusted close to the bars, but this is something that might only be noticeable to riders used to the pull of Avid/SRAM brakes. The levers are swappable left to right and have a two-bolt clamp for easy removal.

The brakes are sold without rotors. Our review sample shipped with lightweight L7 rotors ($40), while the standard V7 rotors ($30) are a claimed 20 grams heavier.

The caliper uses an exclusive alignment system called Crosshair, with two small set screws to simplify initial adjustment of the caliper—a simple idea that delivers one of those "why didn't I think of that?" moments when first used. The adjustable banjo fitting rotates for smooth hose routing. Stock pads are semi-metallic and provide acceptable power with little noise in all conditions.

I wasn't overwhelmed by the power of these brakes and would recommend oversize rotors to all but the most lightweight of riders. Modulation was excellent, making for very controllable braking power—perfect for riding in areas with constantly variable traction.

In cold weather the Prime is the most consistent hydraulic disc brake I've ever used. Even down into the single digits, the only change in performance I noticed was a slow lever return. Some of this can be chalked up to the DOT fluid, but I'm sure the fact that Hayes is located in Wisconsin, where winter can be brutal, helped to insure these discs don't quit when it gets cold.

Compared to the benchmark Shimano and SRAM brakes, the Prime isn't quite up there with power and lever feel. With solid cold-weather performance, very controllable power and the Crosshair adjustment system, year-round riders who don't need or want the most powerful brake on the market would be well served with this brake. **hayesbrake.com**

PHOTO: ADAM NEWMAN

MAGURA MT5 BRAKES $200 PER WHEEL

BY ADAM NEWMAN





MT5 is the entry-level model in Magura's new four-piston brake lineup. A design adapted from Magura's motorsports products, the extra pistons allow for better braking power in more serious terrain.

Magura touts a new ergonomic shape to the brake lever, but if you're familiar with Magura's previous products, the MT5 lever will feel right at home. It is shaped for one- or two-finger braking and works well with a single finger. I've always thought the Magura brake-lever blades were on the thick side, so they might not be agreeable for folks with very small hands. There is also a little bit of play in them at rest, but you can't feel it in your fingers while riding. Finally, the levers lack the tool-free reach and bite adjustment of the upmarket MT7 model, but reach is still adjustable with a tool. I run my brake levers fairly close to the handlebars and it was easy to adjust them right where I wanted them without any awkward ergonomics.

All the hardware on the MT5 brakes is adjusted with a T25 Torx, which is a great feature that should keep stripped bolts to a minimum. The lever bodies are also symmetrical from top to bottom, which means they can be swapped left to right—a smart feature that's becoming the norm for worldwide brands like Magura. They also stand behind the product with a five-year leak-proof guarantee.

The lever body is made from Magura Carbotecture, a high-end synthetic that keeps the weight down. The calipers are forged aluminum and inside the lines is Magura's own Royal Blood mineral oil. The MT5s ship with a two-piece set of Magura's 9.1 organic pads that cover all four pistons but require the wheel to be removed to change them. However, you can upgrade to the 8.1 organic pads, which are four individual pieces and can be swapped without removing the wheel. The pads are held in position with small magnets that guide them into place, which helps make getting the pads installed correctly a breeze.

Everything mounted up easily and the Magura Storm rotor just needed a tiny touch-up out of the box. The MT5s offer plenty of stopping power, but without the hard initial bite of some of the competition (read: Shimano). Their power comes on slowly, but builds quickly. It's certainly a more user-friendly curve for beginners or anyone who isn't pushing their brakes to 100 percent in every corner. **magura.com**

PHOTOS: JUSTIN STEINER

FSA K-FORCE DISC BRAKES $369 PER WHEEL

BY MIKE CUSHIONBURY





Designed primarily as a lightweight cross-country and trail-bike stopper, FSA's K-Force brakes have plenty of key features. The levers are carbon fiber, and the ambidextrous, split-perch body is made from magnesium and uses reliable Torx stainless-steel hardware with a titanium upgrade option. Its minimalist caliper houses two 22 mm pistons.

FSA uses mineral oil and also utilizes a stiffer rear-brake hose. FSA explains that because the rear brake line is much longer than the front, using a stiffer hose will equalize the feel between the two, ideally giving the rear brake the same crisp feel as the front. The brake pads are top loading for easy changing, and while they come stock with FSA's own semi-metallic pads, standard Shimano pads fit as well, ensuring you'll never be high and dry if pressed for a last-minute pre-ride brake-pad search.

Two other main highlights are external, tool-free adjustable lever reach and stroke. This allows for a nice degree of customization not only in feel, but also in how your brakes perform on the trail. The stroke dial (how far the lever comes inward to the grip) is located located on the body near the lever pivot and the reach dial is nestled behind the lever. Total weight hovers a bit over 300 grams per wheel, depending on hose length, which is very light. Our brakes came with FSA's cool, lightweight two-piece rotor with a forged aluminum carrier and narrower profile compared to the standard one-piece rotor.

Setup and installation were a snap and I was immediately impressed with how quickly the caliper moved into place around the rotor with zero pad rubbing on the first try for both the front and rear—a testament to some very true rotors. After a summer and winter of riding they have remained drag free and silent with zero maintenance or adjustment—simply amazing. Setting up the lever reach and throw was also hassle free. With the wide range of adjustment available, most every rider will be able to find their sweet spot for both. The reach tended to remain constant, yet as for the tiny lever-throw adjuster, its position and design is much harder to use compared to SRAM's Guide RSC brakes; midway through a cold, wet winter, it became impossible to turn without the help of a tiny blade screwdriver.

The FSAs aren't the strongest in brute stopping force compared to Shimano and SRAM Guides, and FSA readily admits that because the target audience is cross-country and average trail riding. Absolute on/off power also isn't the only factor. FSA created a lot of controllable modulation into the K-Force brakes that makes slowing down intuitive from brain to finger. FSA also designed its brakes to begin pad movement instantaneously when the lever begins to move—a valid reason why throw adjustment is so important. If you grab a handful, they will stop you quickly. With all this in mind, I was able to maintain complete tire control in turns without locking up the rear wheel, and performance consistently remained predictable.

Ultimately, the K-Force's customizable features allowed me to tailor my braking style to suit, and once that happened I never gave it another thought. As much as I like the feel at both levers and their overall performance, I will say they do fit only one application perfectly, and that's cross-country riding and racing. **fullspeedahead.com**

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PHOTOS: JUSTIN STEINER

29+ TIRES

BY ERIC MCKEEGAN

Since the original introduction of the 29+ platform with Surly's Krampus, riders in love with the plus-size concept have been wishing for/hoping for/demanding a more aggressive tire than the all-purpose Knard found on that machine. While there are more plus-size tires in the pipeline, these two tires are the first we've ridden enough to get a proper review together.

VEE TIRE TRAX FATTY $120

Vee Tire's Trax Fatty was the first non-Knard 29+ tire available to the public. While marked 29x3.0, it is noticeably smaller than the Chupacabra and Knard, although at 880 grams it's substantially lighter as well. This reduced width and height may allow it to fit into more forks and frames than the "full size" plus-size tires. Tubeless setup was painless and the tires held air well.

The casing width exceeds the knob width on both 35 mm and 45 mm rims, which makes for an odd-looking tire shape. The center knobs are ramped, and on hard surfaces these tires are fast. The transition and cornering knobs are small and feel a bit squirmy on pavement. On dry dirt cornering is acceptable, but as things get slick the transition knobs let go easily. Leaning farther over onto the cornering knobs doesn't always catch the slide started from the transition knobs, leading to some interesting moments.

The tires I tested are 120 tpi folding bead with a silica compound. There is also a 72 tpi version with a less-expensive rubber compound in wire bead for $100 or folding for $110. Those riders placing an emphasis on light and fast over absolute traction will find what they are looking for with the Trax Fatty. **veetireco.com**

BONTRAGER CHUPACABRA $120

This tire comes as a surprise, since Bontrager's parent company, Trek, does not offer a 29+ bike for the 2015 model year. I bet this will change in the near future, though.

In the meantime, the Chupacabra should help quiet some of the clamor for a more aggressive tire. While the small square tread and less-than-beefy cornering knobs certainly don't look much more aggressive than the Knard, the Chupacabra is more confidence inspiring in every condition I tried. I set them up tubeless and they snapped into place on both Syntace W35 and Velocity Dually wheels; they seemed to work best between 8 and 12 psi. I was happy with 12 rear and 10 up front in everything but snow, where dropping things a few psi helped immensely with traction but led to a lot of rim strikes and some burping on the Syntace rim.

The 120 tpi casing is supple and the sidewalls are a great middle ground between weight and sturdiness; their 940-gram weight is very surprising for a tire this size. The Chupacabra rolls quickly and corners with confidence and predictability in both the dry and the wet. This tire comes highly recommended. **bontrager.com**




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Exploring sub-freezing and cloud covered singletrack. North Table Mountain in Golden, CO. Rider and Photo: Katherine Fuller



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Owner of New River Bikes ripping his fat bike in 18 degree weather in Fayetteville, WV. Rider: Andrew Forron. Photo by Chris Jackson



When he isn't getting roudy on drops in his back yard, Slimmy J is a volunteer trail builder on Sundays at the RIDENOX Trails in Nockamixon State Park. Quakertown, PA. Rider: Kaleb Sims. Photo by Erik Sims



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RIDER'S EYE



Crested Butte, CO on the Lower Loop Trail along the Slate River. Photo by Greg Madison



Ron Getting High on Drugs. Drugs Trail in Avalon, Patapsco State Park Rider: Ron Tsao. Photo by Ricky deLeyos

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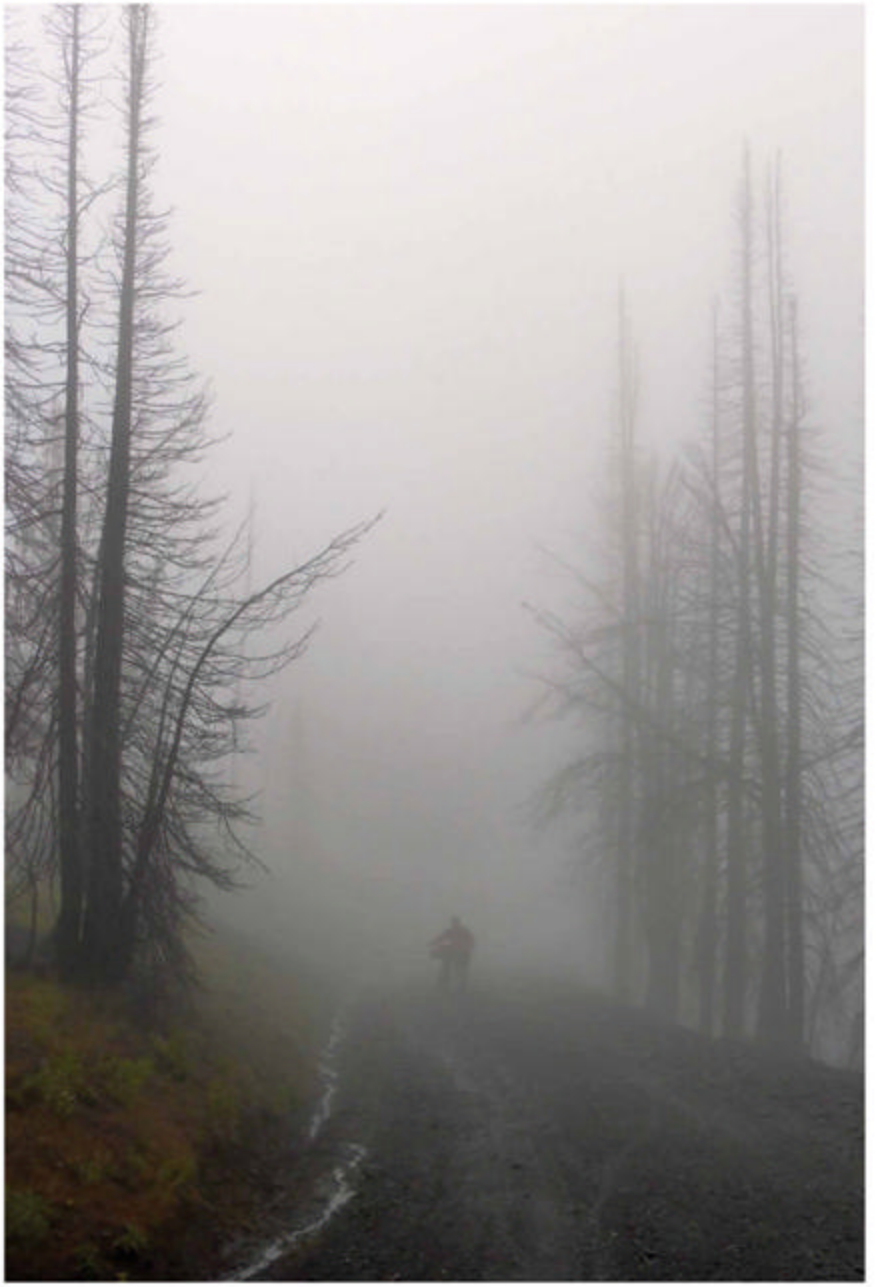
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RIDER'S EYE



Fat tire riding along the shore of Lake Michigan, between Holland and Grand Haven, MI. Sand, surf and snow. Photo by Robert Daniels



Dollarhide Summit, Near Ketchum, ID. Rider: Steve Gilbert. Photo by Doug Covey

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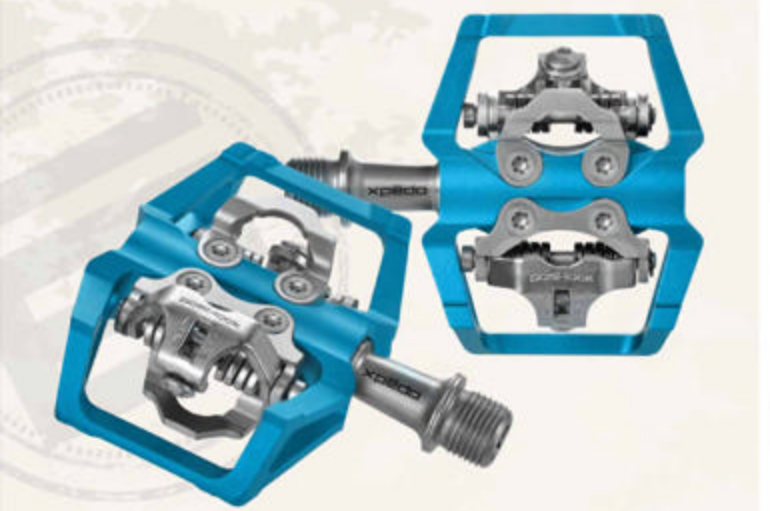
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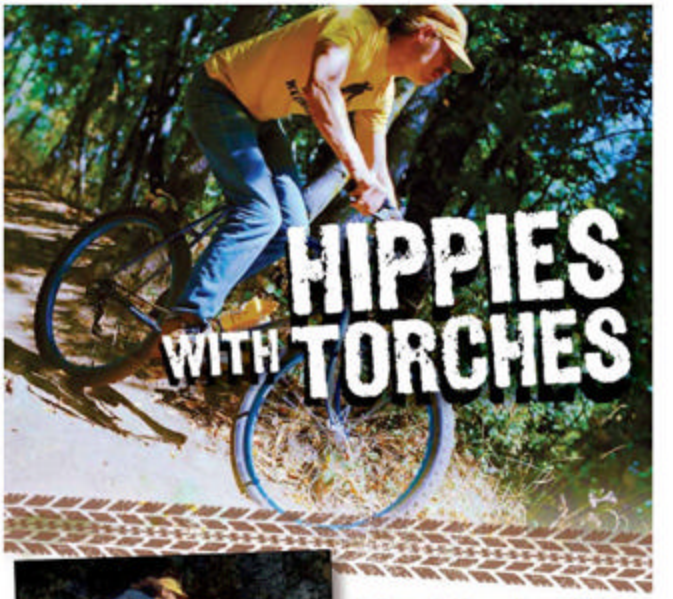
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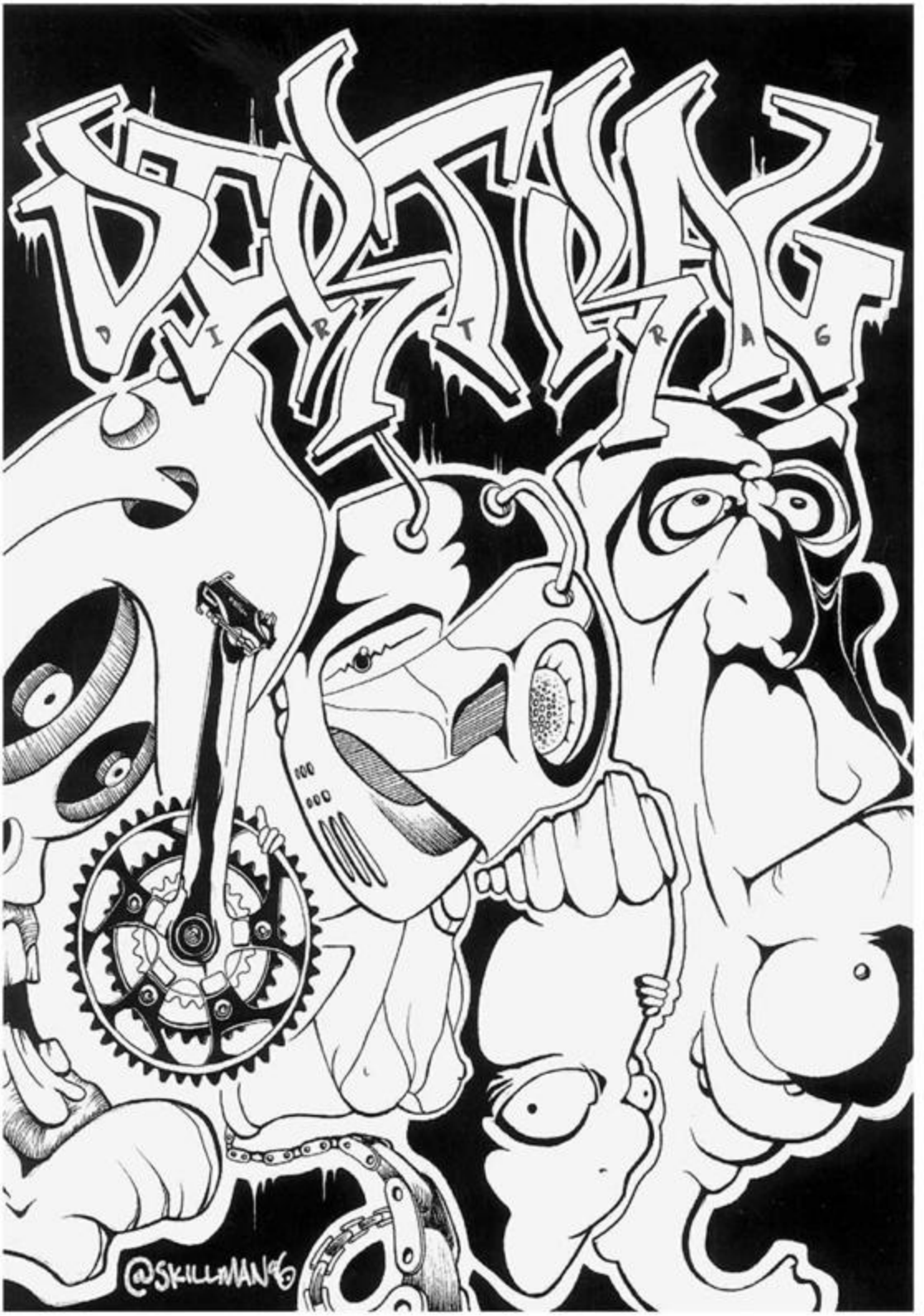

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